# IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE L&D PROFESSION

## Perspectives from independent learning practitioners

CIPD
*Championing better
work and working lives*

**Report**
March 2021

The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The registered charity champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has more than 150,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.

Report

# Impact of COVID-19 on the L&D profession: perspectives from independent learning practitioners

# Contents

## Acknowledgements

## Publication information

# ① Executive summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically shifted the way we learn. Learning and development practitioners have been challenged to step outside of their comfort zone, be curious and embrace new ways of delivering learning with high impact for the digital age.

This longitudinal focus group study investigated the experiences of a group of independent learning and development (L&D) practitioners as they responded to the onset of the pandemic, dealt with the professional and personal ramifications, and navigated their way towards an exciting, yet in many ways, daunting and uncertain future.

The research began in May 2020 with the following aims:

1. **Gain expert insight** into how to deliver learning and development effectively in the digital environment, with a specific focus on delivering formal learning and skills development training.
2. **Identify the barriers** L&D practitioners face and the resources they can draw upon to support them.
3. **Equip the L&D profession** to add real value for the future.

The common barriers faced by L&D practitioners, together with the resources that they drew upon to overcome or mitigate these barriers, were examined through the lens of the **IGLOo Framework**[1] (see Introduction for further details). Table 1 provides a snapshot of the barriers and resources at each IGLOo level, with corresponding take-away messages for learning practitioners.

This report presents evidence from a vital source: practitioner expertise. All focus group participants work exclusively in an independent L&D capacity. However, the majority of findings and key messages are considered relevant to the L&D profession more widely, including in-house L&D practitioners and HR professionals with responsibility for planning and implementing learning interventions within their organisation.

For more on how to make evidence-based decisions, see the CIPD's *Evidence-based practice for effective decision-making* factsheet and listen to our podcast *Evidence-based L&D – 'Why does evidence matter?'*.

---

[1] Nielsen, K., Yarker, J., Munir, F. and Bültmann, U. (2018) IGLOO: an integrated framework for sustainable return to work in workers with common mental disorders. *Work Stress*. Vol 32, No 4. pp400–417.

**Table 1: Barriers, resources and key messages of the IGLOo Framework**

| IGLOo | Barriers | Resources | Key messages for L&D practitioners |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Individual** (the independent L&D practitioner) | • loss of control over work, income and future identity<br>• lack of skills and confidence, for example, with technology/online delivery<br>• feelings of exposure and vulnerability<br>• self-doubt due to lack of feedback from the online learning environment<br>• mental, physical and emotional exhaustion | • self-determination to seize opportunities<br>• reprioritisation of own health and wellbeing<br>• reconnection with personal purpose/ values<br>• renewed focus on learning and experimenting with new skills<br>• reframing of negative thoughts; applying logic and a more positive perspective<br>• identification of new energising habits and rituals | • prioritise your *own* continual learning and development<br>• be brave, curious and prepared to take risks with new opportunities<br>• find safe spaces within which to experiment – for example, with family, friends, community groups or trusted colleagues<br>• protect your energy and own personal wellbeing during challenging times |
| **Group** (learners and fellow L&D peers) | • sense of disconnection, isolation and lack of belonging<br>• reduced natural interactivity and rapport-building during online learning<br>• sense of competition and threat within the wider L&D community | • opportunity provided by homeworking context to forge more 'human' connections and create psychological safety<br>• discovery of new strategies that enhance interaction and rapport-building while delivering formal learning interventions online<br>• peer support and collaboration within the L&D community | • consciously build a social learning environment online<br>• use the tech tools available to generate interaction but avoid overcomplicating<br>• create a safe space for learning by being open and authentic<br>• evaluate what's working best to drive interaction, regularly gathering learner feedback<br>• offer support to peers; collaborate and promote collaboration among others |
| **Leader** (usually the client stakeholder) | • resistance to and undervaluing of online learning<br>• difficulty influencing stakeholders online vs face-to-face, especially where trust has not previously been built<br>• unrealistic leader expectations of what can be delivered and how | • growing openness from leaders/clients to the value of online learning<br>• increasingly productive and influential dialogue based on demonstrating the value of online learning<br>• support from long-standing stakeholder relationships, enabling opportunities for piloting and experimentation | • clarify goals and expectations explicitly<br>• promote continual learning for both parties<br>• leverage existing, trusting relationships to create opportunities to pilot and experiment<br>• promote longer-term evaluation of digital learning with stakeholders |

| Organisation/ outside environment (usually, the client organisation (O) and any wider, overarching barriers/resources (o)) | • immense volatility and ambiguity, with prior strategic direction/ learning plans being ripped up<br>• reduced visibility of employee learning needs, with assumptions easily made on a large scale<br>• inadequate technology infrastructure to support digital learning<br>• safety/logistical concerns regarding any future in-person learning | • organisational culture change is bringing with it shifting mindsets around the benefits of digital learning<br>• investment in technology which better supports digital L&D interventions<br>• many company policies being reviewed to support longer-term flexible working<br>• increased reach and scalability of digital learning providing opportunities for cross-team/department/site collaboration<br>• improved access to formal learning interventions for previously under-represented groups, supporting inclusion and diversity agenda | • in the absence of observation/shadow opportunities, take an alternative evidence-based approach to learning needs analysis<br>• promote the benefits of digital learning for the organisation, for example, opportunities for collaboration, connectivity, accessibility and inclusion<br>• for independents: take steps to protect your own business through careful contracting of digital L&D work (for example, clarifying design time, agreeing cancellation terms, etc) |
|---|---|---|---|

## Key insights for the future

As L&D practitioners reflected on the longer-term implications and opportunities for the profession, four key insights emerged:

1  **There is a place for all forms of learning, from in-person, to digital, to blended.** Learning intervention decisions will be context-specific. However, more organisations will embrace the benefits of digital learning, blended with high-quality in-person interventions that promote social interaction and the accompanying peripheral learning benefits.

2  **New learner priorities and challenges are emerging in the digital age.** There will be increased focus on inducting and onboarding employees digitally, developing a healthy and productive team culture when team members are dispersed, promoting employee health and wellbeing, and employing core management skills remotely. L&D practitioners will have a key role to play in supporting skill development in these areas.

3  **Adopt a learning mindset towards our design, delivery and consultative skills.** The L&D practitioner's own skillset must continue to evolve to meet the changing needs of employees and organisations effectively. Practitioners need to show courage, curiosity and humility. To ensure they continue to add real value, they must invest in their own skills development and role-model what they teach others about being open to learning and new experiences.

4  **Relationships and human connectivity are even more crucial in the digital era.** In an increasingly technology-enabled world, physical closeness has become the novelty versus the norm. To maintain a sense of human connectedness and fulfilment from the work that we do, we must be purposeful in building relationships and rapport with learners, stakeholders and peers. We must do so in a way that is open, collaborative, supportive and real.

# (2) Introduction

> *'The pandemic has given us a real opportunity to step up and show leadership, to navigate organisations into the new world of learning and development.'*

The world of digital learning and development has been accelerating rapidly over the past two decades. Some organisations and industries have been quick to embrace the change, developing their tools, processes and capabilities to support the growing need for learning delivered for the 21st century.

However, many others have been slower to adapt. Digital learning is often seen as the 'poor relation' to face-to-face learning or disregarded altogether. Yet, there is growing evidence that digital methods can effectively achieve learning outcomes in an efficient, flexible and scalable way. (The CIPD examines how the potential of digital learning can be harnessed to support reskilling in the post-COVID-19 economy in the literature review report *Digital learning in a post-COVID-19 economy*.[2])

While blended learning has certainly increased for many in recent years, some organisations have relied upon digital learning solely for transactional, tick-box purposes and have not considered it a viable option to address broader learning needs, for example in leadership development. Consequently, before 2020, many L&D practitioners had minimal exposure to, and experience of, designing and delivering interventions for groups of learners online.

For example, in the 2015 CIPD *Learning and development* survey,[3] 91% of L&D professionals identified online or blended learning delivery as a priority skill, but only 47% said that they had these skills in-house. The CIPD's *Learning and skills at work 2020*[4] report found that digital learning delivery had increased in recent years, with 57% of organisations using methods like digital classrooms or online courses before the pandemic. However, it was far from the most common form of delivery, and more often used in larger organisations.

The role of L&D practitioner is a crucial success factor for online learning.[5] However, until recently, there has been a real gap between research and practice in this area. The onset of COVID-19, and the resulting shift of activity into the online world, presented a compelling context for further research into how to make digital learning a success.

With the arrival of the pandemic, many independent L&D practitioners experienced a 'dramatic overnight shift', characterised by a 'catastrophic' cancellation of most or all formal learning work (much of which had been planned for in-person delivery). This was followed by a 'sudden rush into fifth gear' in response to rapid requests for online programmes.

---

[2] CIPD. (2021) *Digital learning in a post-COVID-19 economy: a literature review*. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

[3] CIPD. (2015) *Learning and development 2015*. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

[4] CIPD. (2020) *Learning and skills at work 2020*. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

[5] See, for example, Choudhury, S. and Pattnaik, S. (2020) Emerging themes in e-learning: a review from the stakeholders' perspective. *Computers and Education*. Vol 144, No 6.

We conducted a research study to explore the lived experiences of a group of independent L&D practitioners as they navigated their way through the pandemic. They experienced a significant range of pressures and barriers along the way. However, they also identified and used various sources of support or 'resources' to help them mitigate these pressures and adapt and grow through the process.

The overall aims of this research were to:

- **gain expert insight** into how to deliver learning and development effectively in the digital environment, with a specific focus on delivering formal learning and skills development training
- **identify the barriers** L&D practitioners face and the resources they can draw upon to support them
- **equip the L&D profession** to add real value for the future.

We conducted our longitudinal focus group study with a group of 14 UK-based L&D practitioners who each work independently within the L&D world, and for whom face-to-face learning previously made up a significant part of their role.

The focus groups took place via Zoom over two time points: looking back over the early months of the pandemic (early May 2020) and exploring change and progress four weeks later (late May 2020).

Finally, in December 2020, the findings were tested and built upon by an additional panel of L&D practitioners.

### IGLOo Framework

We examined the barriers and resources experienced by L&D practitioners through the lens of the IGLOo Framework.[6]

### What is IGLOo?



- The IGLOo Framework, developed by Karina Nielsen and Jo Yarker, was originally designed to support employees returning to work after a period of ill health and has since been used more widely, particularly in the implementation of flexible working practices.
- IGLOo helps us to understand the diverse mix of pressures/barriers we face and the range of 'resources' we can each draw upon to help us overcome these.

---

[6] Nielsen, K., Yarker, J., Munir, F. and Bültmann, U. (2018) IGLOO: an integrated framework for sustainable return to work in workers with common mental disorders. *Work Stress*. Vol 32, No 4. pp400–417.

**IGLOo is used as a frame to explore the barriers and resources faced by independent L&D practitioners throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, as shown in Table 2.**

**Table 2: IGLOo Framework**

| | IGLOo category | Definition within *this* study | Barriers | Resources |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| I | The **individual** | The independent L&D practitioner | The **barriers** faced by L&D practitioners throughout the early stage of the pandemic | The **resources** they used to overcome these barriers and to learn to thrive |
| G | The **group** | Learners and fellow L&D peers | | |
| L | The **leader** or manager | Usually, the client stakeholder | | |
| O/o | The **organisation** and the *outside* environment | Usually, the client organisation (O) and any wider, overarching barriers/resources (o) | | |

Our research findings shine a light on the way independent L&D practitioners have dealt with the crisis, and the profound changes they made to design and deliver learning and development within the digital world. Direct quotes from the focus groups are interwoven throughout the report, and we offer thoughts on future implications for the L&D profession, as well as some tips for the wider learning and HR community.

## ③ Individual findings

**Individual barriers**



Independent L&D practitioners experienced a sudden **loss of autonomy and control** over their work pipeline and livelihoods at the start of the pandemic. Many described the 'emotional roller-coaster' and panic they'd experienced while grappling with the **uncertainty surrounding their personal and professional identities** and the fast-changing expectations of them and their capabilities.

*'It's almost like being a chameleon! As someone who was predominantly doing classroom-based delivery before, I feel like I'm changing and morphing into doing a lot more virtual facilitation. I'm now at the point of thinking – will I be required to change back? Or what will I be required to change into next?'*

With knee-jerk remote learning and development requests from clients suddenly gaining traction, they had to perform on a new, unfamiliar stage. Many **lacked the skills and confidence** that they would ordinarily rely on in the face-to-face learning environment. This unexpected new reality provoked **feelings of exposure, vulnerability and self-doubt**.

Practitioners experienced a real difference in the **sensory cues and feedback** received from online facilitation. Both recognising and understanding how to overcome these differences was experienced as a challenge for all, especially those with less experience in digital delivery. Comparing the different types of feedback in the online environment with the more familiar face-to-face learning environment exacerbated these feelings. Many found that their **inner critic became overactive**.

> *'I'm essentially speaking to a camera and I can't read the room, so that negative chatter starts to come through: "Am I making sense? Do people like it? Is it relevant?" … that feeling of imposter syndrome.'*
>
> *'The most challenging thing is feedback. I have to concentrate a lot more to get those nuances because I can't see much body language. It's really hard to gauge the mood of the room and I find that I have to really, really concentrate on that.'*

Connected to this pressure, the act of delivering learning online can be **mentally and physically exhausting**. Many L&D practitioners struggled to energetically facilitate through a screen while simultaneously managing a multitude of new technology platforms, each with their various quirks. Although this learning mode may now have become the norm, the **cognitive overload** caused for the practitioner through having to 'read the room' and keep focused on learning objectives while juggling the chat box, whiteboard activities, breakout rooms and polls should not be underestimated.

### Individual resources to support L&D practice

In response to this extraordinary range of pressures, L&D practitioners drew upon their inherent resources, seeking to **reclaim some control** and emerge stronger. Initial responses depended largely on individual differences in context and personality. For example, some felt compelled to dive right into the deep end and **say 'yes' to everything** with grit, pace and determination, rapidly transforming their business offering.

Others opted to **press pause**, to take a step back and use the time created through cancelled work to **reprioritise their wellbeing** or other aspects of life. Several used the time to **reconnect with their personal purpose and values** and consider how they might bring these to life within the new context.

> *'It gave me a chance to think about "What am I on this planet to do? And if I believe this is still the case, how can I now do that in this new environment?" It gave me an opportunity to rethink what my priorities are.'*

Those with prior experience in digital learning relished the opportunity to **practise and hone their skills further**, including via informal family or community settings where they were relied upon to share their know-how and help to equip others. For those with less prior experience, these informal opportunities provided a **safe space for learning, experimentation and practice**, allowing practitioners to become even more adept and confident with digital learning:

> *'I've been gaining confidence to use the tech to facilitate a conversation that's close to the way I would do it in a room. I've been experimenting with different ways of doing that.'*

All explored ways of combating the exhaustion of online delivery, experimenting with **new rituals and habits** to increase or conserve energy before, during and after learning sessions. For example, building in a stretch break during the session itself, taking a walk or meditating to clear the mind of distractions and 'get in the zone' before training or to decompress and 'shift gear' after training.

Importantly, throughout this turbulent period, many sought to prioritise **self-care**, and described the following techniques as being useful:

- **reframing their negative internal dialogue**, applying logic to challenge unhelpful thought patterns and build optimism and self-belief
- allowing themselves **time and permission to rest, rejuvenate and to learn and grow**
- **adopting an alter ego** to help shift the mindset and create the right personal energy to deliver digitally.

> *'The best advice I had was to take on the persona of a radio DJ and it's changed things completely for me! I went from being really self-conscious and not wanting my video on, to thinking "this is a bit of fun, I'm playing a character here". And it seems to have worked!'*

### Individual reflective questions

- What has been the biggest change that you've had to make in relation to your learning work through the course of the pandemic, and how have you tackled this?
- What has been your biggest challenge or barrier, and what have you done to overcome or work with it?
- How has your confidence in delivering digitally changed? What would help you to feel more confident?
- What skills, knowledge and abilities have you acquired over this period?
- What strengths have you identified in yourself through this time of change? How could you make more of these strengths going forward?

💡 **Individual key takeaways**

*'More than ever before, we must practise what we preach as learning professionals.'*
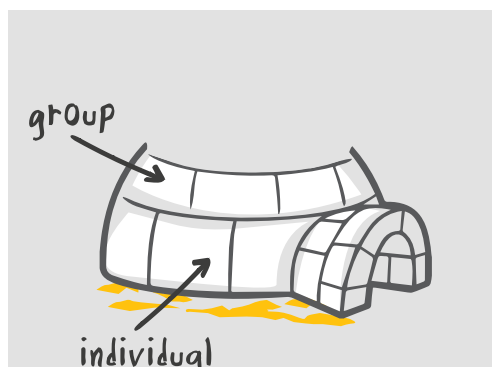
1  **Prioritise your *own* learning**. In particular, commit to building your digital learning skills continuously, increasing your competence and confidence and enabling you to deliver high-quality interventions for learners and organisations alike.

2  **Be curious, be brave and be willing to step outside your comfort zone**. Remember that the pandemic threw everyone into uncharted territory. Therefore, it can be helpful to view stakeholders, learners and fellow L&D practitioners as being on a learning curve together. While coaching others on the importance of being 'human', stepping outside their comfort zone and learning from failures, remember to listen to your own message, show courage and be kind to yourself.

3  **Protect your energy**. Remember that delivering training online can feel more exhausting than face-to-face delivery, so find new ways to conserve energy – before, during and after a session. For example:

- 'Get into the zone' – examples from the focus groups include going for a walk, exercising or practising mindfulness/meditation before delivery.
- Create a post-delivery buffer. Allow time to change the energy, calm the mind, move/stretch, decompress, and reflect on how it went and any follow-up actions. Try to avoid jumping immediately into the next thing.
- Review your personal diary-management approach and whether this needs to change in light of the new way of working. Ensure you factor in sufficient downtime and don't put yourself in the damaging, unsustainable position of *feeling* and/or *being* 'always on'.

## ④ **Group findings**

Here, the 'group' (G) element of the IGLOo refers to either:

1  the **group of learners** engaging in formal virtual learning, or
2  the individual's own **peer group** within the wider L&D practitioner community.

### Group barriers



L&D practitioners in our research highlighted that they thrive off the energy, spontaneity and interaction of an in-person learning environment. This human connectivity provides deep satisfaction and meaning to the work that they do. Many have been struggling with the drastic reduction of interaction opportunities and have felt a **sense of disconnection and loss**.

> *'The reason I do what I do is that I love talking to people and being with them. The hard thing for me is not having that anymore. I miss that human element and it's less fun! I crave face-to-face.'*

Practitioners must work harder to overcome the **barrier created** by learners being dispersed (from one another as much as from the facilitator) and communication through technology. Many described the interaction as more 'stilted', or 'clunkier', involving far **less spontaneous flow** that would ordinarily help to support engagement and create the platform for social learning to take place.

Outside the virtual learning environment itself, a further 'group' level challenge related to the perceived **increase in competition** among the community of independent L&D practitioners.

> *'The market is suddenly cluttered with so many self-professed experts! Everybody who's anybody is bunging everything online, saying: "Look, you can have all our training for free!" And the risk is that people start devaluing online training.'*

Positive intent must be assumed, given that independent practitioners across the globe have been keen to respond quickly and offer support to organisations during such challenging times. However, there was concern among study participants that this over-supply of free and discounted digital learning offerings posed a threat (a) commercially to their own business, and (b) more widely through a potential devaluing of the profession. Concern existed that the quality of learning offerings could be compromised as a result.

**Group resources to support L&D practice**

Over time, L&D practitioners sought to challenge their own assumptions and started proactively experimenting with **new strategies for generating interaction** and rapport with learners online. For example:

- intentionally factoring in time for **informal greeting/conversation**, to break the ice and establish a human connection upfront
- **using the technology tools creatively** (polls, whiteboard, breakout rooms, chat box, and so on) to gather insight and increase engaged discussion among learners
- building into the design **screen breaks for individual reflection activities**, shifting the energy and improving the level of input/interaction when the group comes back together.

It helped some to **reframe** the 'digital classroom' in their own minds. They shifted their view of it from a stilted place to an environment where personal connection can occur, with a little more concerted effort.

> *'There is something about it being more intimate, training people in their own living rooms as opposed to within a corporate setting. You're able to see people as truly themselves and it makes us all a little more human.'*

Despite a general concern about increased competition within the field, the independent L&D practitioners started reaching out more proactively to peers for emotional support, to share knowledge/ideas, and to **collaborate**. Many found the **peer support** incredibly helpful. There is a strong desire to sustain this collaborative, supportive network beyond the life of the pandemic.

## Group reflective questions

- What strategies have you developed to generate rapport and interaction with learners online? What other strategies and activities could you use?
- What learning techniques have your learners found most/least effective?
- What has worked in achieving a good balance of individual reflection and interaction/ participation during a training session?
- How regularly have you reached out to peers to share knowledge, ideas, support? How could you build your peer networks further?
- What could you offer to peers? What could your peers support you with? How will you go about facilitating this reciprocity?

### Group key takeaways

1. **Consciously build a social learning environment.** Apply the principles of social learning theory (in that learning takes place through interaction with others in a social context) to every online training session. Set clear ground rules for interaction at the start and provide varied opportunities and methods for social connectivity throughout. The CIPD factsheet *Learning theories for the workplace*[7] includes information on social learning and other key learning concepts that may be helpful.
2. **Use the tech tools available but avoid overcomplicating.** Breakout rooms, polls, whiteboards and chat box features offer many valuable options for generating interactivity. If used purposefully and effectively, they support and enrich learner engagement, but skilful facilitation is also crucial. Trust yourself and your capability as a facilitator. Allow enough time and space to ask great questions, probe lively discussion and debate, pay attention to what the group needs in the moment, and respond appropriately.
3. **Create a safe space by being authentic.** Be prepared to be yourself and show your own 'humanness' boldly. This will create a psychologically safe space for your learners to do the same. The screen can act as a barrier and prevent people from fully engaging. However, learners will take their cues from you and be more likely to interact if it feels safe.
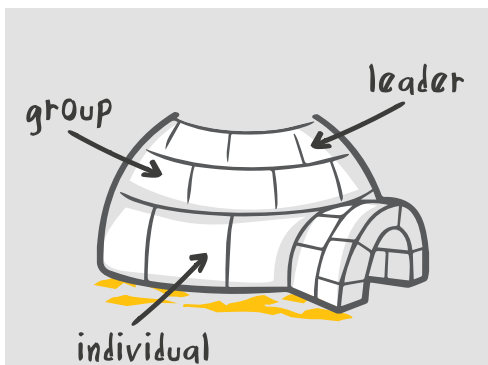
---

4. **Promote collaboration outside the digital classroom.** Design activities before/during/after the confines of a formal learning session that encourage learners to collaborate in pairs or smaller groups. This will strengthen their connection and will naturally lead to increased comfort with interacting as a larger group.

5. **Evaluate what works and what doesn't.** Regularly request feedback from learners to gain an in-the-moment understanding of what is and isn't working for them. Use this insight to continue improving your offering, which will reduce the uncertainty and even anxiety that lack of learner engagement can create for you as the facilitator.

6. **Seek out collaborative relationships versus competitive ones.** Consider who within your L&D network may be beneficial for you to partner with on future projects and who may value your support. Cultivate these peer relationships and agree new routines for staying connected without the necessity of face-to-face interaction.

# (5) Leader findings

Ordinarily, the 'leader' component of IGLOo refers to the individual's own line manager within an organisation. Within the context of this study, where participants are independent L&D practitioners, the role of 'leader' is assumed to be their key client stakeholder(s) – those who commission and/or direct their work.

### Leader barriers



The overall sense among independent L&D practitioners was that in the past, clients generally had **not valued online learning** to the same degree as face-to-face learning. Delivery methods reflected this pre-pandemic. In the CIPD's _Learning and skills at work 2020_ survey, more than four in ten organisations reported that the majority of learning was delivered face-to-face.

Dialogue with client stakeholders at the start of the pandemic was challenging, and their **expectations often unrealistic**. Many clients assumed that face-to-face workshops could easily be converted to online, showing little appreciation for the time, effort and cost required for this conversion to be done effectively.

> '_Some clients expect us to just drag and drop a classroom course … there's an expectation that conversion will just happen magically! But it's not as simple as just repurposing; it requires a complete rethink of the design of the programme._'

Since the start of the pandemic, there has been a sharp increase in free or discounted learning options available on the market. As an independent practitioner it has been tough and frustrating to **persuade stakeholders to invest in learning** that may be more costly, due to being designed specifically for the digital environment.

A lack of prior relationship in place with clients has made influencing more challenging. Attempting to establish new contract work or progress projects during the current climate, with **lack of face-to-face contact a barrier to building trust**, has often felt transactional and less fruitful.

### Leader resources to support L&D practice

In contrast, where **long-standing stakeholder relationships** exist, independent L&D practitioners have been more successful in aligning expectations and agreeing a fair and viable way forward for remote learning work. Many reported open and **productive dialogue with leaders** who quickly reached out, trusting them to provide guidance and support through such uncertain times.

As a result of now widespread homeworking arrangements, leaders have generally shifted from cancelling learning and development interventions to becoming much more **open to online delivery as a valid and efficient option**.

Many stakeholders have actively increased their support, recognising the potential benefits of digital learning for their organisation. As a result, L&D practitioners have become more motivated and confident, with many getting a buzz from proving just how engaging and effective it can be.

> *'A lot of our clients wouldn't have dreamed of doing online training for behavioural stuff before. Many have said over the years: "We can't do leadership development virtually; we can only do stuff where it's 'tell.'" Whereas now they're suddenly doing it and saying: "Oh my goodness, I had no idea that it could work so well!"'*

Some have also managed to leverage their long-standing leader relationships to pilot new online approaches, seizing the opportunity that these **trusting relationships** offer for **experimentation and development** of their L&D offering before wider rollout.

### Leader reflective questions

- How have your relationships with leaders/client stakeholders evolved throughout the pandemic?
- How have you sought to develop and/or sustain trust without relying on face-to-face interaction? What methods of communication have you found to be most effective, and why?
- To what extent does your leader/client see you in a 'partnership' capacity, and how could you strengthen this? For example, through:
  – sharing best practice
  – challenging their thinking with sound evidence
  – raising awareness and providing guidance on what it takes to deliver effective digital learning

**14**

– provoking them to see the importance of long-term evaluation
– emphasising the continual learning journey that you are on together.
• How much support do you currently get from your leader(s) with regards to L&D programme planning/implementation, and what would it take to improve this level of support?
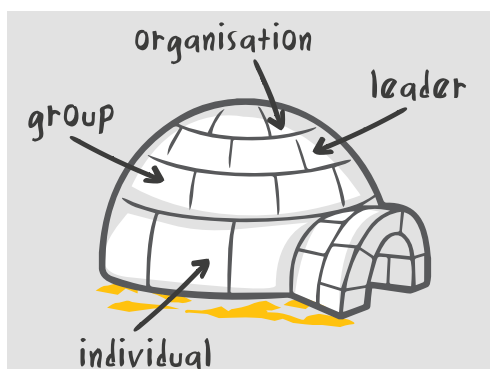
💡 **Leader key takeaways**

1 **Clarify goals and expectations explicitly.** Take a learning approach with leaders/clients when assessing needs and agreeing on a learning programme's parameters. Partner and advise them candidly on how digital and online learning should be designed and delivered to be effective and what it takes at each stage. Use your experience to provide clear evidence around what is required, what works and what doesn't work, to reach a fair agreement.

2 **Promote continual learning for both parties.** Recognise the importance of the stakeholder relationship and the value you can bring to provide counsel and support them through challenging, changing times. Be prepared to boldly take conversations to a new level and recognise that you will be strengthening this relationship for both parties' benefit through continually learning and growing together.

3 **Identify trusting relationships to support experimentation.** Prioritise and use long-standing, trusting leader/client relationships where you have support to experiment with new ideas. Pilot programmes and interventions before rollout. Use insight to build and extend your offering and position yourself well with new teams/clients.

4 **Promote longer-term evaluation of digital learning.**[8] Use your own credibility, reputation and commercial savviness to influence leaders around the critical importance of longer-term evaluation. Where evaluation is not prioritised, use what you learn from your own digital learning experience to build a more compelling case. Keep an open partnership dialogue going and encourage leaders to see the importance of measuring behaviour change and longer-term impact for the sustainability of their organisation.

## ⑥ Organisation/outside environment findings

**Organisation/outside environment barriers**



COVID-19 threw organisations into an extreme state of flux, and consequently, independent L&D practitioners found that many of their clients were forced to discard their long-term capability plans. The necessity of adapting to the array of threats thrown up by the pandemic and the inevitable restructuring and business transformation left little appetite for a strategic approach to learning and development.

[8] CIPD. (2020) *Evaluating learning and development*. Factsheet. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

> *'People plans have been ripped up and thrown in the bin! It's "finger in the air" in terms of knowing what they want and need to focus on, so this is a major blocker from a learning and development perspective.'*

Homeworking has rapidly become ubiquitous, and many organisational cultures are evolving alongside these new ways of working. However, the lack of a shared physical environment and/or restricted access to office space has created a partial **blindness to employee learning needs**, with assumptions often being made. As a result, L&D practitioners have occasionally been commissioned in haste to provide learning that has not quite hit the mark.

When it comes to the delivery itself, the organisation's **preferred technology platform** has often been a source of frustration. Not all platforms are created equal, and some offer less scope for engaging, interactive learning, creating a barrier and restricting the quality of experience for both facilitators and learners.

The type of organisation and the nature of its work/workers can have a bearing on the extent to which digital learning is considered a long-term viable solution or not. However, as time has progressed, certain organisations have started to seriously consider the viability of **resuming in-person learning**. This has thrown up multiple questions and obstacles for L&D professionals to overcome, regarding **logistics, safety and insurance**.

The impact and uncertainty surrounding the pandemic is far from over. Therefore, these questions and obstacles are likely to remain for some time.

### Organisation/outside environment resources to support L&D practice

The culture change taking place in so many organisations throughout the pandemic has brought an overall **shift in mindset** and **increased openness** towards remote working and, consequently, digital learning. This transformation has, slowly but surely, been opening up opportunities for **L&D practitioners to play a more significant role** in partnering with the organisation, supporting them to drive their change agenda.

Organisations with weaker **technology infrastructure** are being forced to invest, and their newer systems are creating stronger platforms to support quality training.

**Company policies and procedures** are being widely reviewed. In some cases, this has followed consultation with staff about their feelings towards returning to work post-COVID, and their longer-term flexible working options. Many organisations are seizing opportunities to retain some of the unexpected benefits that have emerged from widespread homeworking, for example, reducing office space to create cost efficiencies, leveraging technology to become more agile, increasing collaboration across departments and geographies, and reducing staff travel time to support wellbeing.

As policies evolve over the months to come, a framework will likely emerge to clarify how best L&D practitioners can operate in a **safe and flexible** way in the future. Many organisations will shift towards a more **blended approach to learning**, incorporating both in-person and digitally enabled solutions. In light of this, many are proactively advising their clients/organisations, providing insight and evidence from the unique experiences of 2020 that will **support strategic decision-making** surrounding learning and development for the long term.

For our group of independent L&D practitioners, another angle was to focus on their own organisation, taking steps to **nurture and protect their business**. For some, this involved assessing and repositioning their learning offering to meet future client and learner needs. It also meant adjusting contractual terms to ensure clear and fair arrangements for digital learning during the current period of uncertainty (including, for example, cancellation fees) and to give their business the best opportunity to thrive within this new era.

### Organisation/outside environment reflective questions

- How have you seen perceptions of digital learning and, in particular, online delivery within the organisation shift during the COVID-19 pandemic? What opportunities does this hold for you?
- To what extent does the organisation value/carry out long-term planning and evaluation of learning? What could you do to utilise and shift this perception?
- What has worked for you to support and influence the organisation proactively? What could you do more of?
- If you are an independent practitioner, how might your contractual terms need to be adjusted/tightened to protect your business from current and future levels of uncertainty?
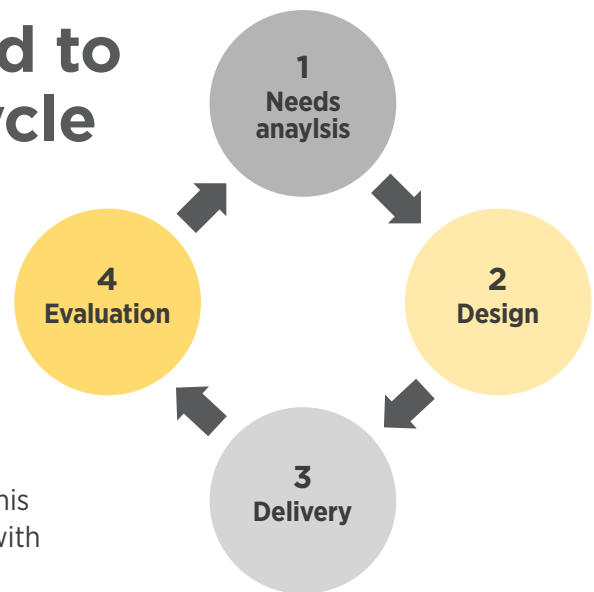- How can you ensure clear management of expectations upfront when embarking on new L&D projects?

### Organisation/outside environment key takeaways

1 **Take a creative approach to learning needs analysis.** Think flexibly about how learning needs analysis can be approached within the current organisational context. Close observation and shadowing opportunities will be limited or non-existent for some time, so take an alternative evidence-based approach to support organisations to accurately diagnose learning needs. Consider using global or national benchmark data and policy reports about training needs and skills gaps to aid understanding and support sound learning investment decisions. The CIPD's factsheet _Identifying learning and development needs_[9] offers support on conducting effective learning needs analysis.

2 **Promote the collaboration benefits of digital learning.** Encourage organisations to maximise the opportunity that digital learning provides to bring together widely dispersed groups. Integrating learning across sites, departments and agencies can greatly strengthen networks and increase collaboration – both within and outside the organisation. These partnerships will be vital to sustaining the operations, culture and identity of organisations (and indeed industries) for the long term as remote working becomes firmly rooted.

3 **Utilise digital learning to drive inclusion.** The growing prevalence of digital learning is opening up opportunities for organisations to take a more holistic approach. Under-represented groups can gain access, and are more confident to attend, where previously this has not been possible (for example, due to budget constraints preventing junior employees or certain 'support' functions attending in-person training). Encourage organisations to realise the benefits of all employees having access to learning interventions at the click of a button that help them grow, perform at their best and fulfil their potential.

---

[9] CIPD. (2020) _Identifying learning and development needs_. Factsheet. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

4  **For independent L&D practitioners: protect your *own* organisation.** Carefully review new contracts to ensure tight parameters around logistics and technology. For example, state that the client is responsible for administering all technology aspects if this is appropriate. Clarify payment/cancellation terms for online versus in-person learning, to manage expectations upfront. It will be vital to ensure as much protection as possible from the ongoing COVID-related change and uncertainty so that your organisation can continue to thrive.

## (7) Insights aligned to the learning cycle



Insights and considerations emerging from this study are summarised below in connection with their relevant learning cycle phase.

**1**
- Acknowledge that traditional learning needs analysis methods may not be viable, so look to wider evidence to support the case for specific interventions.
- Play a collaborative, consultative role with leaders/ clients, using your experience and insight to inform investment decision-making.
- Clarify learning outcomes with stakeholders, being transparent about time/ resource requirements for digital learning solutions.

**2**
- Consider a blended, modular approach, integrating various learning modes to suit the context and provide space for practice/application of learning.
- Apply sound learning principles to digital design and curation, for example, incorporating opportunities for social learning and reflection.
- Avoid direct conversion of in-person to digital learning. Reduce and simplify content, being thoughtful about what needs to change for a digital context.
- Build in learning activities prior to digital classroom learning that will help prime learners appropriately, being considerate of their varied homeworking situations and challenges.
- Be mindful of your own energy levels when spending long periods designing on screen. Build in time for preparation, movement breaks and rest/relaxation.

**3**
- Identify opportunities to pilot new delivery approaches.
- Set ground rules upfront about how interaction will work during a session.
- Be intentional about building rapport with learners and role-model active participation throughout.
- Strike a balance between using tech tools and keeping things simple with skilful facilitation techniques.
- Be open, be inclusive, create a safe space for learners to share.
- Actively promote collaboration and social learning opportunities throughout.
- Build in breaks away from the screen for reflection and stretching.

**4**

- Request regular in-the-moment feedback on how online delivery is working to engage learners.
- Actively use learner/stakeholder feedback to continuously adapt and improve offering.

- Promote longer-term evaluation with leaders, using evidence to highlight the importance of understanding the value of digital learning for their organisation's health and sustainability.

- Link evaluation with wider organisational metrics and learning expectations of stakeholders identified in needs analysis.

## ⑧ Looking to the future

The pandemic has brought on significant change and uncertainty. Independent L&D practitioners have been reflecting upon what these changes may mean longer term for the learning and development profession as a whole. **Four common themes emerged:**

### 1  There's a place for all forms of learning – from in-person, to digital, to blended

For those who weren't already delivering digital learning, the pandemic has acted as a catalyst for online delivery and has challenged assumptions about which mediums of learning are most effective. Some organisations and industries treated digital learning with scepticism; however, many of those same organisations have shifted their stance dramatically to embrace all aspects of digital learning with open arms. That said, **there will continue to be a place for face-to-face learning**, and some organisations will move quickly to reinstate this when logistically possible and safe to do so. This is a good opportunity for L&D practitioners to use their expertise to ensure that the learning delivered is in the most effective format.

For certain organisations (for example, those with clear security and confidentiality concerns) in-person learning will remain the core approach. However, many others, despite embracing digital learning, will be keen to blend this with in-person learning interventions. They will see real benefit in bringing employees physically together and creating learning communities away from day-to-day operational distractions, where organic **social connection** and all the valuable **peripheral learning** that comes alongside it can occur.

**Blended learning** had already started to come into its own within some industries pre-COVID and will gain much more traction in future (a trend previously noted in the CIPD's _Learning and skills at work 2020_ report). L&D practitioners must continue to work with stakeholders to **evaluate the impact** of digital solutions alongside in-person delivery and other learning modes. Through this evaluation, we will discover how to get the best from each approach and be equipped to make sound judgements on how to blend the modes effectively. Ultimately, we will deliver high-quality flexible programmes that suit both the organisational context and learner needs.

### 2  New learner priorities and challenges are emerging in the digital age

Despite greater difficulty in diagnosing learner needs during such a tumultuous time, this study highlighted several key areas of priority and challenge emerging as a result of the pandemic and its dramatic changes to organisational life:

- delivering effective **induction and onboarding** practices in a digital environment
- developing and sustaining a happy and productive **team culture/identity** when team members are physically dispersed

- promoting employee **health and wellbeing**, and in the short to medium term, helping to reduce the anxiety of many around returning to the workplace
- integrating a **'remote management' dimension** into learning topics, for example leadership skills such as coaching, giving feedback and motivating teams. Equipping leaders and managers to execute these skills effectively through digital means and in person will be vital to ensuring happy, productive and high-performing employees.

There is room for further research as to whether digital delivery can work for any learning topic or whether some topics require in-person interaction to be truly effective. The pandemic has challenged us to find new, creative ways to make previously unworkable things work, to be curious and open to possibilities. However, as above, further testing and evaluation will be needed to assess which modes achieve the greatest positive impact on learning transfer and behaviour change, thereby making them most sustainable.

Find CIPD resources on responding to COVID-19 in our Coronavirus hub.

### 3  Adopt a learning mindset towards our own L&D skills

Regardless of the learning topic, L&D practitioners need to role-model continual learning through building and adapting personal skillsets, so they are best equipped to thrive in response to the ever-changing present and future demands.

- **Design skills:** In-person learning content can rarely (if ever) be magically converted to the digital platform with the same impact without thoughtful redesign. So, we must apply sound learning principles and give careful attention to **designing and curating** digital content that will engage, inspire and provoke behaviour change in learners.
- **Delivery skills:** We must show ongoing commitment to developing **delivery/facilitation skills** for the new age, learning how to strike the right balance between the use of innovative technology tools to generate engagement and tried-and-tested methods. Do this through active listening, asking thought-provoking questions, drawing out insights, and bringing energy and motivation to a group of learners in an authentic way. We must also equip learners to use online tools and navigate the online environment effectively.
- **Consulting skills:** There is an exciting opportunity for L&D practitioners to up their game in this area, partnering with leaders and clients as they navigate through this turbulent time and into an uncertain future. Through taking a **consultative coaching approach** with sound diagnosis from an early stage, we will understand contexts more deeply. This will help diagnose needs and make sound recommendations, demonstrating the value that L&D can add to supporting long-term organisational goals.

### 4  Relationships and human connectivity are even more crucial in the digital era

Be it with learners, stakeholders or fellow practitioners, **cultivating relationships** in the increasingly digitalised world is of paramount importance. Working at a physical distance from others forces us to collaborate differently and more deliberately. We cannot take our network for granted but need to be more conscious about growing and sustaining it as learning professionals.

We also have an opportunity to promote this concept both explicitly and implicitly through the learning interventions we deliver. We can have a lasting impact on others by intentionally generating connection and rapport in our interactions, both inside and outside the formal training environment. We can role-model **'being human' in the digital world** by showing our vulnerabilities and encouraging others to be their true selves, remembering that this is uncharted territory and that we are all on a learning curve together.

And lastly, **there is room for everyone**. We build ourselves up by reaching out and supporting our fellow L&D practitioner peers, through recommendations, coaching and mentoring, testimonials and partnership working. Let's think about how we can recognise one another and recognise the **power of collaboration** for our success and the success of others, and consequently, the success of the L&D profession.

# (9) Conclusion

The transition to digital learning is not a simple one, with the COVID-19 pandemic pushing it into the spotlight. Our study identified several barriers and challenges experienced by L&D practitioners across each stage of the learning cycle. Some of these challenges were relatively short term, such as feelings of exposure and vulnerability at switching to online delivery and identifying gaps in capability and/or addressing confidence needs.

Other barriers appear to have further-reaching implications, not least the ongoing volatility for organisations and the resulting challenge of long-term planning and evaluation against this backdrop. On another note, the more personal issue of prioritising and protecting one's own health and wellbeing, while adapting to such a new way of working, is not a straightforward one to solve.

However, the research also identified a wide variety of resources that L&D practitioners can draw upon to mitigate and/or overcome the barriers. These range from their own inherent resources, such as their strengths, skills, values and personal levels of resilience, to resources drawn from others – peers within the L&D community, leaders and clients, as well as broader resources from the organisation itself.

Looking ahead, we can expect an ongoing acceleration in the use of digital learning, albeit with a continued need and desire to blend this with interventions promoting face-to-face learning and collaboration. Learner needs and priorities will continue to evolve, providing great opportunities for L&D practitioners to step into a bigger space, to enhance their and the organisational offering and to sharpen their skills in the process.

The extraordinary pandemic times have demonstrated that it is vital to build up one's bank of resources – in particular, finding ways to cultivate collaborative relationships and human connectivity as an antidote to the challenges posed by the digitalised world. Through using these resources, L&D practitioners will strengthen themselves and one another for the demands that lie ahead, adding real value to the profession while continuing to thrive personally.

# CIPD