DIGITAL LEARNING

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Moreish morsels: the sweet taste of snackable content

With research highlighting the pitfalls of traditional teaching, a growing number of firms have gained an appetite for bite-sized learning and its power to boost knowledge retention

Peter Crush

When Panasonic noticed that its call-centre staff were finding it hard to recall all the technical details it expected them to learn about its huge range of products, the electronics giant realised it had a problem that's long been discussed in training circles.

This is the awkward fact that, when humans supposedly learn something, it's a temporary affair at best. Several studies have shown that half of any new information imparted is forgotten within a day and up to three-quarters can be lost in a week. After a month, very little is retained at all. That's a whole lot of training budget vanishing into thin air.

"Typically, we would put our new recruits through three weeks of classroom-based product training," says Panasonic's general manager of customer care in Europe, Bruce Swan. "But we realised that, if they didn't receive enquiries about a particular product straight away, their retention of that learning would soon peter out."

The company's solution was to develop and, in partnership with cloud-based communication platform Fuze, deliver what is now approaching 2,000 bite-sized units of on-demand learning. Each one lasts only three to five minutes, enabling learners to 'snack' and then move on to the next one.

Bite-sized learning has its critics, who deride it for pandering to the short attention spans of the social media generation and argue that it does little to develop a deep understanding among users. But Swan and others are proving that this format is more effective than the conventional approach.

"Stripping the learning right back forced us to define the knowledge we really wanted people to retain," he says. "We found that course pass rates increased by 17% and the retention of information by our agents improved by 10% overall."

The key to the success of bite-sized learning centres on what neuroscientists call spacing theory – a refinement of the work of German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus in the 1880s. From his research, he concluded that learners' retention of information will drop to 40% within days unless they review that material repeatedly.

"Biologically, bite-sized learning suits the brain's first need to deal with small packets of information at a time," says e-learning expert Leon Hady, a former headteacher who transformed the performance of an inner-city school.

Ryan Chynces, senior manager of online education at Hootsuite, agrees, adding: "Where bite-sized learning excels is that it recreates the 'spacing' that learners need, because it's designed to be returned to again and again. It may sound perverse, but a small chunk of information actually becomes harder for the brain to remember over time. But the learner's effort of going back and retrieving that material makes it easier for them to recall it later down the line."

In essence, then, the key task of those designing bite-sized content is to make the material engaging enough to make learners want to return to it and deepen their knowledge in the process.

This is exactly what happens with the e-learning that Hady provides: learners come back to his material three times on average. Meanwhile, 60% of Panasonic's call-centre staff are returning to its bite-sized content in their own time and on their own devices, even though they aren't obliged to.

A broader benefit of bite-sized learning is that it's easier for busy people to fit around their other activities. This has proved useful to pub and hotel operator Marston's.

"It isn't practical to get our predominantly shift-based teams all together at once," explains the group's head of learning and development, Jane Murray. "What we can do with our bite-sized approach is extend learning to 8,000 people almost simultaneously. We have found that they simply start opening the content immediately, as if they were consuming material on social media."

To prepare its furloughed staff for their return to work after the Covid closures, Marston's sent out bite-sized learning modules, designed in collaboration with Norwegian startup Attensi, on topics such as how to discuss menus and handle customers' queries. None of these modules was more than two minutes long. Their content mixed pure information with games and multiple-choice quizzes to test learners' comprehension.

Users had to play the content an average of 2.3 times before they were certified as passing the course, but many went through it four times or more because they enjoyed the activities, according to Murray.

"We know our learners' retention of this information has improved," she says. "After their first play, their average score was 61%. By the time they achieved certification, the average was 93%."

Such results represent a challenge to more traditional forms of training. As Paul Wakeling, executive director of curriculum and quality at The Skills Network, notes: "Bite-size learning is deceptively effective because people tend to want to binge on many modules in one sitting, just as they might with TikTok videos."

Whether it will replace traditional longer-form e-learning or even face-to-face methods is a moot point.

"We have reduced our classroom training at Panasonic to three days," Swan reports. But, even though the firm's customer-satisfaction ratings are significantly higher than they were before it introduced bite-sized learning, he and others do not foresee the end of traditional methods just yet.

"The function of coming together face to face will be different," Swan predicts. "That format will be more about sharing knowledge and discussing things further."

Murray believes that bite-sized learning will "become significant at Marston's, but it won't replace critical thinking and conversations".

But, with both also reporting that staff are using bite-sized learning as a way to explore other career paths their firms can offer, it's clear that more really is being done with less. The smaller the snack, the more it seems to satisfy. ●

SMALL BITES OF LEARNING LEAD TO BIG PROGRESS

As of 2019...

45%
of US learning and development departments planned to use micro-learning videos
Findcourse.com, 2019

73%
of global businesses have no intention to introduce micro-learning methods
Sierra-Cedar, 2019

FG Trade via Getty Images

Commercial feature
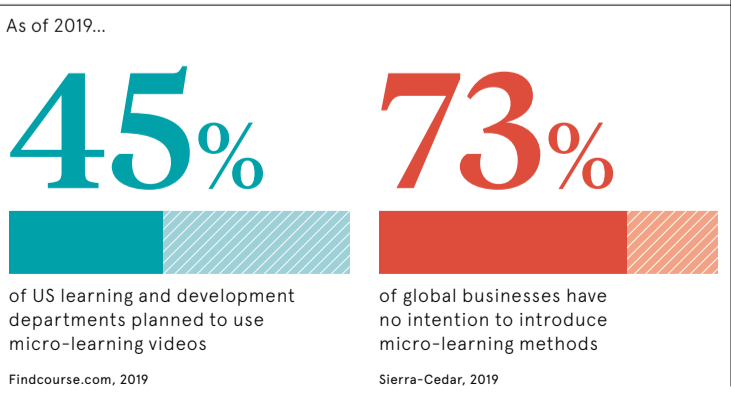
Closing the knowledge gap with virtual science labs

The lack of in-person lab learning during the pandemic has fuelled a concerning learning loss, but universities that adopted innovative science simulations supplements have seen impressive results

W hen practical teaching sessions were first cancelled at the beginning of the pandemic last year, few people could have anticipated the full global scale of enforced distance learning. The Covid-19 crisis was a major catalyst for creative digital transformation among educators, who swiftly sought to adapt to various lockdowns by adopting innovative solutions for learning online.

For already stretched science lecturers in universities, however, the pandemic brought additional strain. Pivoting to online not only required a whole new skill set, but challenged traditional formative and summative assessment paradigms. As many universities imposed reactive, one-size-fits-all strategies, digital learning curiosity was replaced with apprehension.

Students have also found it difficult, not only missing out on the more social aspects of physical learning but also suffering differing degrees of learning loss as educators got to grips with online alternatives to classes and labs. In a survey by the Higher Education Policy Unit in June 2020, just 42% of undergrad students said they were satisfied with the online learning that had replaced face-to-face teaching.

Not only existing university students have been affected, meanwhile. Students who entered university earlier this month endured nearly their entire A-level studies without the bare minimum opportunity to apply procedural knowledge or practical experience in scientific investigation, leaving many heading into higher education lacking confidence in their abilities.

"The physical act of performing one's own experiments can be a critical consolidation event in a student's personal development," says Dr Sarah Jayne Boulton, global curriculum lead at science learning platform Labster, which offers virtual laboratory simulations. "Students report feeling underprepared for the rigours of higher education both on an academic and social level, as few have visited their future institutions.

"We know that students come to universities with varying levels of experience. This is tough for students to negotiate at the best of times as they inevitably compare themselves to their peers and judge themselves as coming up short. It also presents a challenge for educators as they have to negotiate the pitch and depths of their teaching to accommodate that variability, which has only increased as a consequence of Covid-19 due to the unavoidable study interruptions."

It's perhaps inevitable, then, that student success forecasters have largely predicted an overall negative trend for higher education achievement during the pandemic, particularly in science degrees which traditionally require extensive time in labs. Yet universities that have embraced innovative platforms like Labster are in fact seeing better results than pre-pandemic.

When Labster was deployed after the pandemic prevented over 400 students in San José State University's 'Introducing Chemistry' course from attending in-person labs, the average final exam grade increased from D+ in 2019 to B–, a 16% improvement. Student engagement, meanwhile, also saw a boost, with 96% of students saying they like the flexibility and 75% finding it fun and stimulating to learn with Labster. It's no surprise the course will be taught with a combination of in-person and Labster virtual labs going forward.

Northumbria University has also maintained performance through its use of Labster, despite the lack of in-person labs. "Grades are probably about steady-state with how they were pre-Covid," says Dr Seth Racey, senior lecturer of applied sciences at Northumbria University. "Once a student disengages from a course, there's not much you can do to prevent them from failing. What Labster offers has significantly supported the students and has meant they haven't just tanked."

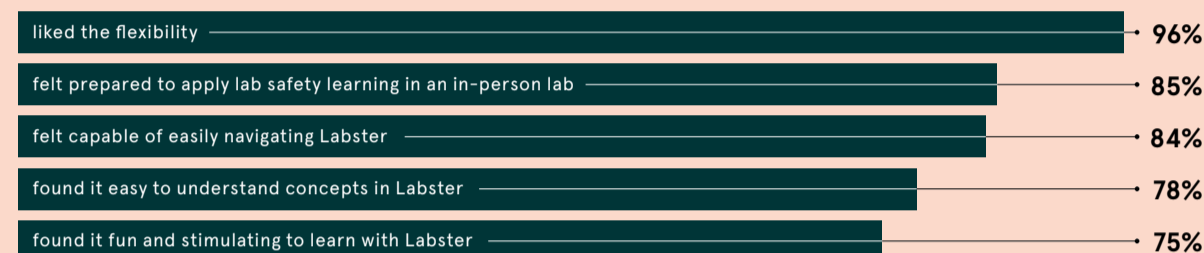Built with disengaged students in mind, Labster offers a narrative-based, immersive learning experience that can trigger curiosity-driven engagement with a wide variety of concept and technique-based scientific topics. The guided, self-paced learning experience in its virtual lab simulations means that every interaction and choice counts and progresses the immersive scientific storyline. Crucially, the learning experience is catered to the needs of every student.

Labster's simulations use quiz questions to set up and progress learning cycles. The quizzes are autograded, and data is available on the number of attempts made per simulation, per student. Depending on how each respective educator chooses to implement the simulations, this scoring feature can provide a load-lightening progress metric in a summative or formative scenario.

"The optimal outcome is not necessarily that you get a score of 100%," says Dr Lori Banks, assistant professor of microbiology at Bates College, who uses Labster in her biology courses. "The optimal outcome is that you learned something, that you were curious, and that this now makes you ask other questions."

Educators are empowered to implement the Labster platform however it best fits their curriculum. Many take a low stakes approach, providing a repeatable learning experience that students can dig into with curiosity.

"Some students have lots of lab experience, and some have very little," says Dr Victoria Allen-Baume, lecturer at the University of Essex, who has used Labster's virtual labs in her 'Life Sciences Foundation' course. "In terms of practical skills, it's really helpful to let them practice things that we might be doing in a real lab later on, or just to refresh and update their skills."

Physical learning environments may now be gradually returning, but science education and how people want to access higher education has been forever changed by Covid. Students have learned how they like to access learning resources and how to take a flexible approach to scheduling and planning. Learning platforms like Labster have not only helped to support and scaffold their academic paths at a critical time, but will be increasingly important in the future.

"The uptake of Labster over the past 18 months has been phenomenal," says Dr Boulton. "We've been presented with so many opportunities to learn from our educators and tailor our future content offering to serve the needs of institutions and students alike. We are well positioned to continue supporting both sides in mastering scientific concepts and techniques, and we look forward to a hopeful future where digital tools have been implemented that not only facilitate effective knowledge transfer, but also improve student access and equity across the sciences."

LEARNING OUTCOMES

16.02% IMPROVEMENT
Average final exam grade increased from D+ to B–

6.04% IMPROVEMENT
Average final course grade increased from C+ to B

STUDENT SURVEY
Students who learned with Labster

liked the flexibility	96%
felt prepared to apply lab safety learning in an in-person lab	85%
felt capable of easily navigating Labster	84%
found it easy to understand concepts in Labster	78%
found it fun and stimulating to learn with Labster	75%

WHAT STUDENTS SAID

FLEXIBLE & FUN

❝ I was able to work at my own pace and was under less stress.❞

❝ I can do a virtual lab on my own time.❞

❝ It's fun.❞

❝ It keeps things interesting.❞

❝ I like how the simulation puts my knowledge to the test.❞

MAKES IN-PERSON LABS EASIER

❝ Using virtual labs can help before doing the physical lab so that you can have a better understanding of the task before executing it.❞

❝ If I do a laboratory online and then show up to a laboratory physically, I will have some background knowledge.❞

❝ I'd rather use virtual labs to learn and try out concepts on my own before or after the actual in-person lab.❞

HELPS YOU LEARN FROM MISTAKES

❝ Virtual labs let you repeat a step if you mess up an experiment.❞

❝ There is no fear of messing something up.❞

❝ It felt more like a video game, there was room for trial and error without real consequences.❞

❝ I have had bad experiences in all my labs in my college career, but the virtual labs built my self-esteem and confidence.❞

❝ What Labster offers has significantly supported the students and has meant they haven't just tanked

For more information, visit labster.com/digital-learning

Labster

Total recall: the rules of online retention

Digital courses offer immense flexibility, but they must be treated by both users and employers with as much care as any other format to ensure that the learning sticks

Katie Byrne

Thomas Barwick via Getty Images

A s most of the world closed down in the spring of 2020, the potential for digital learning opened up. After all, with the lockdown restrictions keeping classrooms empty, going online was the only way for many people to study. LinkedIn, for instance, reported that professionals around the globe spent a combined 49 million hours on its courses alone in the 12 months to July 2021 – a year-on-year increase of 50%.

Ellen Buchan is insight executive at the Association of MBAs and Business Graduates Association, which recently conducted an international survey of 171 business school leaders. She predicts that "the shift to digital teaching looks set to stay. All but 16% of our respondents are planning to retain the new technologies they have adopted during the pandemic, while 82% expect to make further investments in online tuition. Their motivations include wanting to be ahead of the market, as well as preparing students for the digital workplace."

These findings are understandable, given how online learning has proved its worth during the Covid crisis. But, while it clearly provides more flexibility than conventional alternatives are able to offer, learners can find it more difficult to retain information that's conveyed through their computer screens. So how can professionals increase their chances of success?

To start with, that very same flexibility actually puts the onus on learners to take a more disciplined approach to their studies, according to Matt Stanfield-Jenner, director of learning at digital education platform FutureLearn.

"Establishing goals, behavioural standards and other good habits is important for any successful learning exercise, but especially online," he says. "This is because its anytime, anywhere format obliges you to manage your own agenda. It forces you to be more responsible."

Next, a conducive learning environment is essential for helping learners to maintain their focus. Bianca Miller-Cole, co-author of the newly published entrepreneurs' guide *The Business Survival Kit*, stresses the importance of freeing yourself from all distractions.

"That means switching off your phone, ignoring your emails and truly setting sufficient time aside to concentrate on learning," she advises. "Treat the content – whether it's live or recorded – as if you were in a room with a teacher, focused on their lesson."

Sharing what we learn with others can help us to retain information too, notes Gwenan West, head of people at CIPHR, a software provider specialising in HR applications.

"You are much more likely to remember a piece of information you've just learnt if you have to explain it to someone else," she says. "If you're learning online as part of a group, create a virtual community. Use this forum to discuss course content with your fellow students. This will not only help you with fact retention; it will also enable you to ascertain other people's understandings of the material, which may differ from your own."

❝ If you suspect that people aren't retaining what they've been taught, mentor and coach them

The relevance of the course material is clearly also key to successful knowledge retention, as it gives learners a better chance to put their knowledge into practice. The more applicable the information, the more likely they are to be able to understand how it will benefit their work and career prospects.

Rachel Heron is head of people transformation at BT Security, which offers employees a range of digital learning tools, including Pluralsight, Immersive Labs and Centrical. She says that "keeping the training relevant is one of the most important priorities for our team. The digital platforms we use offer benchmarking and suggestions for improvement. People can see exactly what they need to learn if they want to progress. They also have a clear view of how certain skills can be transferable if they're seeking to change roles."

For a more futuristic approach to improving information retention, consider learning in virtual or augmented reality (VR and AR), suggests Dr Alex Young, founder and CEO of immersive training company Virti.

"VR and AR are perfectly suited to developing skills for infrequent scenarios and high-risk environments – think oil-rig engineering, brain surgery and emergency responses," he says. "Research has shown that humans learn best by deliberate, repetitive practice that's easy to access and fun to engage with. Students who train on immersive tech platforms not only develop more refined skills but also hold on to their knowledge for longer."

So how can business leaders be confident that any investment they make in employee development is actually worth it? The first step is to decide in advance how you plan to gauge the value of your employees' educational endeavours.

"If it's relevant, look at key performance indicators before and after the learning activity," West suggests. "If you suspect that people aren't retaining what they've been taught, mentor and coach them. Give them time to go through what they have learnt and provide a platform or project that will enable them to practise their new skills."

Skill retention assessments can also be built into immersive platforms, with artificial intelligence systems able to gather performance data gleaned from multiple-choice quizzes and practical exercises, Young notes.

"Each user's progress can then be monitored over a period to gauge their knowledge retention and pinpoint areas for further development," he explains.

BT Security provides mentoring classes, using an in-house training team and subject experts to help "embed the learning and close any identified gaps", Heron says. "The supported learning cohorts ensure that our people have the best possible chance of passing their exams."

Stanfield-Jenner agrees, stressing that managerial engagement is essential. "Gone are the days of sending people away on courses. Instead, colleagues can pick up anything from 10-minute micro-learning through to deeper learning on a 100-hour credential. But they all require some level of support, advocacy and integration," he says. "A big part of that is to build learning into people's everyday working lives. By setting professional development goals that stretch employees and embedding learning within that framework, you can be sure that you're helping people to learn in the knowledge that they have your full backing."

Ultimately, he adds, integration is essential wherever possible. It gives employees the opportunity to apply what they have learnt within the strategy of the business.

Stanfield-Jenner concludes that real benefits can accrue only if the learner has had the chance to apply their new knowledge. "This allows them to demonstrate a change in behaviour, challenge existing practices and show that tangible, valuable results have resulted from their aptitude for learning." ●

HOW QUICKLY WE FORGET
Adapted from Ebbinghaus's forgetting curve, 2015

Percentage of information we retain over time without 'strategic refreshing'

50% After one hour
30% After 24 hours
10% After one week

Day 1 | Day 2 | Day 3 | Day 4 | Day 5 | Day 6 | Day 7
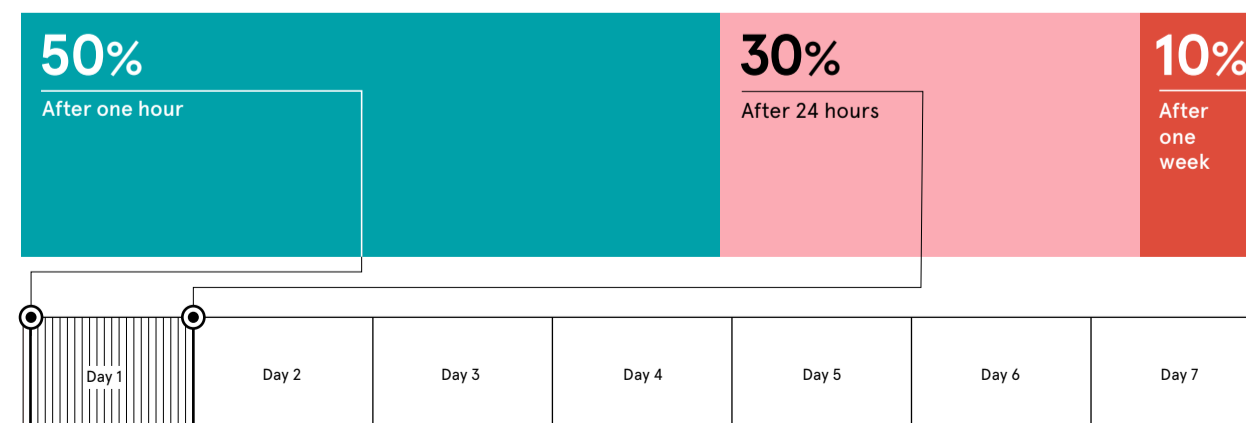
DIGITAL LEARNING IN THE WORKPLACE AND THE CLASSROOM

The adoption of digital learning has been hastened by necessity during the Covid crisis. But, as the technology improves, there is a strong case for further implementation, in both the workplace and the classroom. Tech-based teaching methods seem destined to grow in sophistication, practicality and reliability. While some challenges remain, expectations for the future of the online format are high

HOW STUDENTS GRADE THEIR INSTRUCTION

US college students' ratings of online tuition compared with traditional teaching methods

- ● Better
- ○ About the same
- ● Not as good
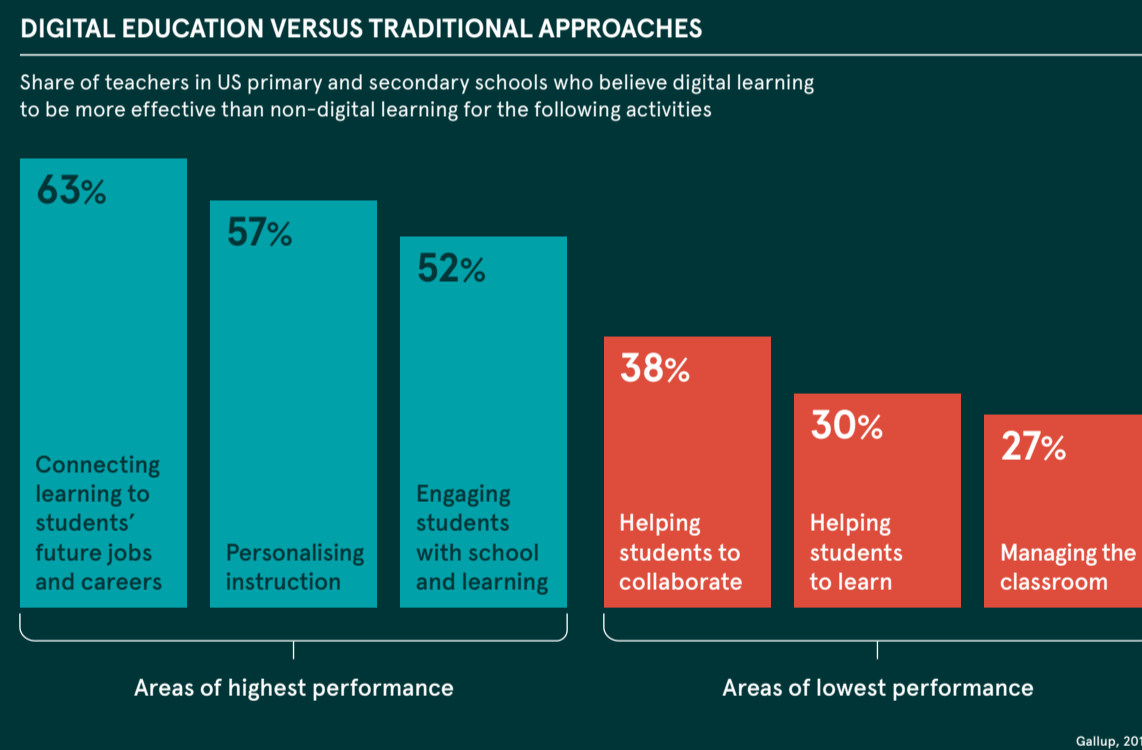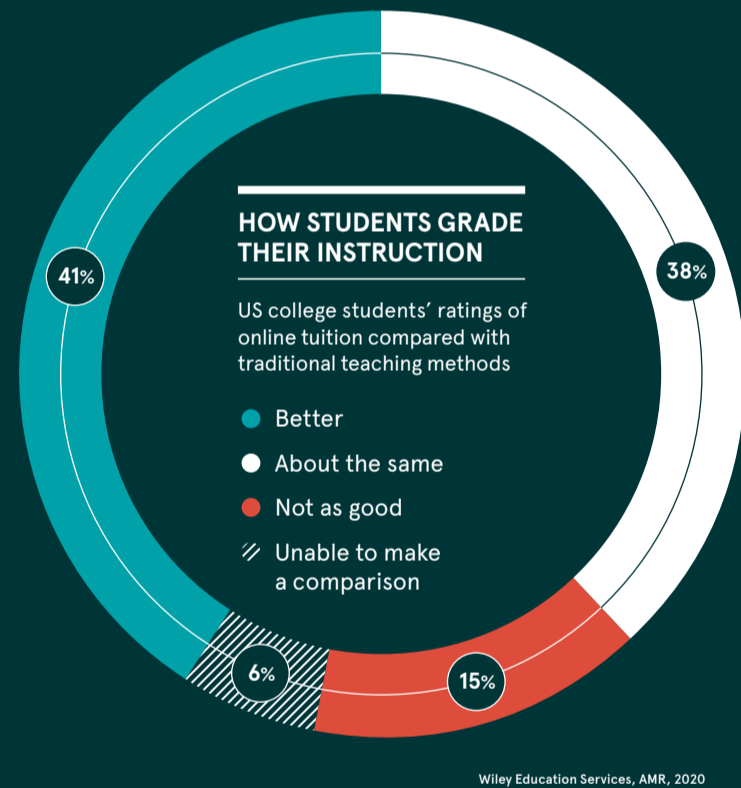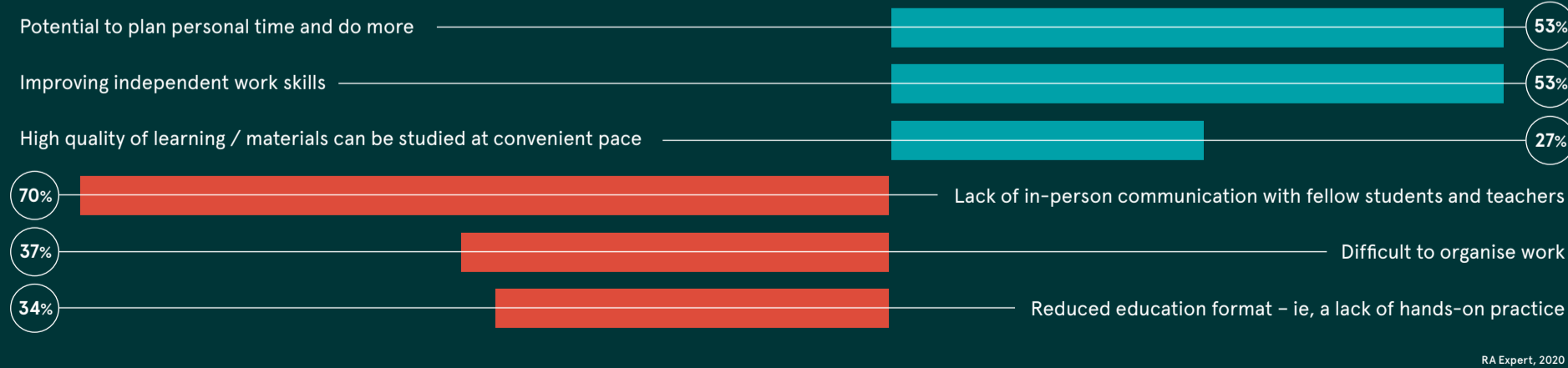- ▨ Unable to make a comparison

41%
38%
6%
15%

Wiley Education Services, AMR, 2020

DIGITAL EDUCATION VERSUS TRADITIONAL APPROACHES

Share of teachers in US primary and secondary schools who believe digital learning to be more effective than non-digital learning for the following activities

63% Connecting learning to students' future jobs and careers

57% Personalising instruction

52% Engaging students with school and learning

Areas of highest performance

38% Helping students to collaborate

30% Helping students to learn

27% Managing the classroom

Areas of lowest performance

Gallup, 2019

THE PROS AND CONS OF LEARNING AT A DISTANCE

Advantages and disadvantages of remote learning, as identified by Russian university students (% of respondents)

Potential to plan personal time and do more — **53%**
Improving independent work skills — **53%**
High quality of learning / materials can be studied at convenient pace — **27%**

70% Lack of in-person communication with fellow students and teachers
37% Difficult to organise work
34% Reduced education format – ie, a lack of hands-on practice

RA Expert, 2020

BUSINESS LEADERS CONSIDER DIGITAL LEARNING TO BE THE MOST EFFECTIVE METHOD OF SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Formats identified as suitable for skill building among those significantly correlated with skill transformation

75% Digital learning
60% In-person/virtual workshops
48% Peer learning teams
46% Expert coaching
32% Performance support
22% Organisational/individual diagnostics

McKinsey, 2021

REASONS FOR ADOPTING ONLINE LEARNING

The top factors cited by French companies behind their uptake of digital training tools

- ● Improve pedagogical effectiveness
- ● Become more responsive to business challenges
- ○ Reduce training costs
- ● Modernise our image
- ● Follow trends
- ● Because this is the imminent end of face-to-face learning
- ▨ Respond to what the management asks

31%
29%
2%
2%
5%
15%
16%

ISTF, 2020

7 in 10

employees in a remote working set-up expect access to online learning platforms so that they can develop skills at their own pace

Capgemini, 2021

PROJECTED GROWTH IN THE MARKET

Total turnover of the global corporate learning sector in 2019 and a projected total for 2026

$17bn 2019

$37bn 2026

Valuates Report, 2020

> **Ideally, digital learning will be used to supplement traditional methods, not replace them**
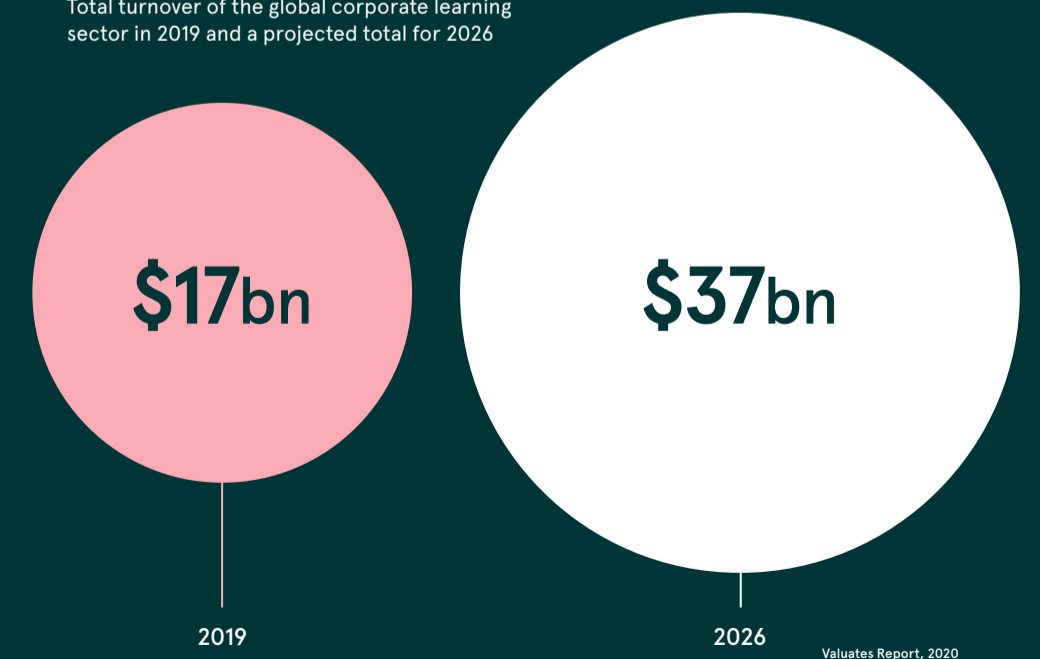
DISTANCE LEARNING

From Zoom to classroom

Having been schooled remotely through a time of extraordinary upheaval, students returning to the lecture theatre can offer educators useful guidance in shaping the future of digital learning

Marina Gerner

The past 18 months in education have seen a stream of technology-driven changes, which have demanded flexibility from students and teachers alike. Even as classroom-based courses resume, it's likely, if not certain, that digital learning will continue to play an important role. While educators adapt their methods to realise some of the opportunities presented by the format, they would be wise to consider the insights gained by students who've lived and learnt throughout this transitional period.

We asked freshmen at the New York University Leonard N Stern School of Business, who are spending this academic year at NYU London, to reflect on their experiences. After all, many are likely to become business leaders themselves in the future, with budgets to allocate to training and developing their employees.

Having spent their final year of high school as online students, they have returned to the classroom as undergraduates. Which aspects of their digitally administered instruction have been most valuable? What do they appreciate about being back in the classroom? What would their ideal learning experience look like? And how might these lessons be extended to the business world?

Keels Braga: "Since the world shifted towards an entirely new way of learning, there has been time for me to examine both the benefits and drawbacks of digital education. My

need to use software such as Zoom has taught me how to adapt more quickly to other new programs and adjust my style of learning and thinking. But, since my return to the classroom, I've found it nice not to have to worry about whether I'm going to hear 'your mic is on mute' – a phrase I hope I won't encounter too often again.

"As the business world becomes a more online-focused environment, it's important to consider that most large deals will still be sealed in person. After all, if someone is selling their company or giving large sums to invest, they might at least want to shake a hand."

Antoine Van Veen: "Initially, digital learning offered me unprecedented work/life balance, enabling me to spend less time travelling to school and more time with my family, but this silver lining of the pandemic was short-lived. For me, the calibre of in-person learning is unparalleled. I appreciate the social interactions it enables me to have with my classmates and teachers."

Hannah Olah: "The digital-only learning experience reduced the number of cooperative classroom activities that we could engage in. Group work, class discussions and interactive lessons all became rare occurrences, for instance. Online education became a less personal and more homogeneous process because educators were restricted to providing lecture-style classes, while students were limited to developing their ideas individually rather than collaboratively. As a result, students faced a 'social disconnect' that prevented them from learning as efficiently as they would in a face-to-face setting."

Anish Jog: "The time I spent as an online-only student showed me how

unpredictable technology can be. I had to cope with random power cuts, internet outages and even mic problems. My office space was the same space I slept in – every day felt the same. Returning to the classroom has made me feel sociable again.

"My ideal learning experience would definitely factor in face-to-face interactions, because I appreciate how engaging the classroom environment can be. There is something about talking to a screen that I find unsettling. But online learning has at least taught me to be more tech-savvy, which should prove invaluable to me in our increasingly digital world."

Andrew Zou: "I have found the most valuable part of digital learning to be its accessibility – 'snow days' could no longer stop classes, for instance. The past year has convinced a lot of people that non-traditional online universities are the future. After all, why would you pay so much for college tuition when you can learn the same material online more cheaply? But I disagree with this sentiment. I found that, once I was back in the classroom, I appreciated my social interactions with classmates and teachers.

"Ideally, digital learning will be used to supplement traditional methods, not replace them. It could enable students learning about apartheid to hear from a civil rights activist in South Africa, for instance, or help students learning French to practise by talking online with people in France."

Aadhya Khanvilkar: "I did value remote learning's ability to unite my classmates during the Covid crisis. It made it much easier for people to stay connected in difficult times. But, honestly, the learning wasn't the same. I appreciate having live instruction, because being there with a teacher helps me to focus and encourages me to ask questions. My ideal learning experience would take place in person and prioritise active discussion, rather than busy work assignments or lectures."

Kiran Kashyap: "I lose almost an hour a day now that I'm commuting to the classroom, yet I find myself more productive than I've ever been. I'm avidly reading new material, pumping out essays and working hard on other projects. There is some magic about being in the classroom that beats not only the comfort of virtual learning but also the loss of time to travel. The magic of face-to-face interaction isn't restricted to the classroom; it extends to the workplace and is ever so relevant to the business world." ●

The business world needs to emphasise a hybrid model. An effective approach would be one that allows students who aren't well enough to travel to remain fully immersed in the classroom environment."

Sriya Yemireddy: "I think I speak for most students when I say that distance learning wasn't the peak of our educational experience. Our past 18 months in isolation have revealed just how crucial face-to-face interactions in the classroom are. The connections a student makes with their classmates and teachers are as important as their academic work. If we could keep the individualised learning aspects from online school and the interpersonal relationships from traditional school, we could create more productive working environments."

25%

of US students enrolled on online college courses worry about balancing their education with work, family and other domestic obligations

BestColleges, 2020

Learning in the flow of life

Generational and technological shifts have fueled the rise of microlearning, as people prefer to learn not just in the flow of work but in everyday life, say getAbstract's UK vice-president of sales Jayne D'Silva and enterprise relationship manager Kartik Bhatt

Q How has digital learning evolved in recent years?

KB The pace of technological change alongside demographic shifts in the workplace - with Gen X, Gen Y and Gen Z all working in one organisation - has shaped how we learn, and digital trends are evolving to satisfy this modern-day learner. Microlearning has become a core part of every organisation's learning strategy because it offers short, focused pieces of content with actionable learning objectives that slot easily into the little time people have available to learn.

Adaptive learning is also proving transformational, with AI algorithms that detect knowledge or skill gaps to deliver learning activities bespoke to each learner. Learning personalisation is fundamental to the success of any digital learning strategy. The 'one-size-fits-all' approach no longer engages learners, who expect learning to be aligned to their individual role and personal development objectives.

Q What is involved in a successful content-driven learning strategy?

KB When computer-based training first emerged in the 1990s, organisations were buying huge libraries of content and just throwing it at a wall hoping it would stick, which mostly it didn't. Digital content has improved over the past 30 years, but the most important thing is to contextualise it to individual learners. It's pointless having brilliant content unless people know about it.

Relevant content also has to be available to each learner. Getting the right content to the right learner at the right time was once seen as a marketing responsibility but content creation, delivery and governance are very important to the L&D function now. People don't want to spend time learning what they may or may not need well into the future. Furthermore, through a well-defined content learning strategy, organisations can create a

framework that includes content-rich media assets, metadata and relationships between learning assets, which all contribute to taxonomised, contextualised and relevant learning content.

Q What does it mean to learn in the flow of work?

JDS Learning in the flow of work is about embedding small learning opportunities into the work day by providing learners with the right content at the right time in the right format. Learning becomes seamless, without any disruption to the work activity. It's like having the [authors and public speakers] Simon Sinek, Stephen Covey or Tony Robbins follow you around providing short bursts of advice. It provides learners with context, so they can immediately apply what they have learned, and improves knowledge retention and recall as the learning is available on demand and can be accessed multiple times. At getAbstract, we firmly believe people are increasingly learning in the flow of life. When people search online for answers they don't even realise that learning is taking place. It has simply become part of the flow of life.

Q Where does compressed learning fit into this?

KB Josh Bersin's research on the modern-day learner confirmed that employees only dedicate 1% of a typical work week to focusing on learning and development, which is 24 minutes per week. Compressed learning is crucial. The modern-day learner is overwhelmed and constantly distracted with emails, calls and the like, so if learning isn't compressed the average person will have neither the time nor the motivation to consume and retain content. Social media platforms have contributed to much lower attention spans, so if you want to make learning relevant, you need to give access to precisely the right information, in an actionable format, and deliver it when and where it's needed.

Q What are the key learning challenges as companies adapt to the hybrid way of working post-pandemic?

JDS A positive aspect of the recent challenges has been the emergence of flexible hybrid working and an increased emphasis on mental health and wellbeing. These changes have put individual learners in charge of how they work and learn. People are suffering from digital fatigue, so companies are encouraging their workforce to take time away from the screen. The podcasts or audio files they listen to while walking, exercising or even gardening represent a different style of learning. Meanwhile, with the normalisation of online meetings and the use of chats and virtual whiteboards, learners can be actively engaged regardless of their location. L&D teams have had to adapt very quickly to embrace virtual learning.

KB The social collaboration element of learning has suffered the most, due to hybrid and remote working. It is well documented that we learn through interactions with our coaches, mentors and peers, but dispersed workforces have made these vital aspects of learning difficult to achieve. The lack of social collaboration has affected learning performance. The daily micro-interactions we used to have with our colleagues in the office are missing. L&D teams need to come up with creative and interactive ways of maintaining a social connection between employees,

creating an environment in which they can learn from each other.

Q How is getAbstract supporting learners and organisations?

JDS As learning increasingly happens in the flow of life, not just at work, getAbstract helps learners make better decisions in both their business and personal lives. We provide access to the best business thinking through multiple formats at the point of need. Whether through reading, listening to audio files or watching videos, getAbstract provides unbiased, actionable knowledge in a timely manner and builds a platform for curiosity to prevail. Our compressed content allows individuals to fit learning into their busy lives and helps build digital capabilities across teams, while also supporting a self-directed

learning approach where learners can develop at their own speed. Our purpose is simply to make the world a better place, one decision at a time, through access to relevant and actionable knowledge. In 10 minutes you can learn something new, keep up to date with the world and make things happen!

For more information, download getAbstract's Content First! guide for L&D leaders at **hub.getabstract.com/content-first**

}getabstract compressed knowledge

Bridging the learning gap

Though most people see the importance in learning, only a minority actually seek to develop themselves, despite soft skills becoming increasingly in demand by employers

T he appetite for digital learning has been increasing over many years now, but few could have expected the sheer rate of acceleration in 2020 and 2021, amidst the reshaping of the learning environment caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Though classroom teaching will remain a key component of any successful education or training strategy, lockdown-driven lifestyles exposed the masses to the great value and importance of online learning today.

The past 18 months have particularly illuminated the growing significance of soft skills to employees and their employers alike, and this is where online learning comes into its own. While classrooms are still, largely, the best environment in which to learn hard, specialist skills, remote working has elevated the importance of softer skills like communication, collaboration, creativity, problem solving, and the agility and flexibility to adapt to changes.

The continuum between hard and soft skills has resulted in a desire among many HR professionals to seek 'T-shaped' employees. The vertical stem of the T symbolises the depth of specialist or technical skills and the horizontal bar represents more human skills and the eagerness to learn other things. If organisations want to develop a more T-shaped workforce, they must find the right balance between training employees in both 'technical' and 'human' skills, as digital learning firm GoodHabitz calls them.

"Just because someone can code doesn't necessarily mean they can speak strongly in front of an audience, take feedback or contribute well in discussions," says Tim Segers, country director UK at GoodHabitz. "Too often employers hire based on a hard skill and only later discover a degree of soft skills are needed to make the role a success. It is those skills which you can apply in every field, every industry and every job.

"A lot of the technical things we can do as humans are being taken over by automation, but robots will never be able to replicate what really makes us human: our behavioural, social and emotional skills. That makes investing in those skills increasingly important.

GOODHABITZ USAGE OVER LAST 3 YEARS
GoodHabitz, 2021

> We facilitate learning in a way that is super accessible and practical at the moment of need

We have seen that reflected in a major uplift in usage of our online courses during the pandemic, particularly areas like leadership, communication and wellbeing. Online learning provides the ease and accessibility to develop soft skills in a way that suits you."

While wanting to inject more soft skills into their workforce, organisations face barriers to achieving a living and breathing learning culture. The usage of online learning courses and platforms, while growing, is too narrow. Research has exposed a gap between the number of people who say learning is important, 89% in a study by GoodHabitz, and those actually making efforts to advance their personal development, which averages at only 20% of employees.

Part of the challenge is competing for people's time. Though many employees might feel they are too busy to invest time in learning, the average UK adult watches video content for five hours and 40 minutes a day, according to Ofcom. People dedicate a third of their waking hours to watching TV or entertaining videos on social media channels because they enjoy it. But this clearly implies that if learning content was as attractive and engaging as a movie or TV series on Netflix, then companies would soon find more workers consuming it.

"Making learning available is just the start of the journey. When only a fifth of people are intrinsically motivated to develop themselves, a much bigger part of your organisation needs a nudge," says Segers. "They need context and urgency. You need to explain why they should take a course or why they should develop themselves. We have seen that learner marketing, while also involving the leadership team, is crucial to really bridging that gap, as is making the learning content itself practical, meaning it provides immediate value to users.

"But perhaps most importantly, learning should be attractive and engaging. It should be as fun as watching your favourite series on Netflix, and that's our focus. We facilitate learning in a way that is super accessible and practical at the moment of need – you can learn hugely valuable soft skills how and when you want – but also that triggers people's curiosity, often including humour and other fun aspects to keep their attention."

To make learning fun, GoodHabitz offers 25 different learning formats catering to all learning needs and styles. From videos to written content, quick scans to mini-documentaries, everyone can learn in their own way. More than 459,345 courses were completed by GoodHabitz users in 2021 so far, proving if learning is fun, people will want to engage with it.

GoodHabitz is unique among providers of online learning courses in that it believes there should be no limit to who has access to learning. Once an organisation signs up, all of its employees have unlimited access to all GoodHabitz courses. Removing boundaries to learning in this way is crucial to achieving a real learning culture.

However, it is still vital for the HR department to promote learning and development, supported by a senior leadership team, which must make a clear statement that they want to be an organisation in which learning is normal, embedded and encouraged. This will not only create a happier, healthier and more effective workforce, but one that is able to attract better talent from elsewhere.

"When you allow people to learn, you give them the chance to grow and be better," says Segers. "Employees want to feel like their company is investing in them, and that they care about their wellbeing and development. What are they providing to propel me forward in my life and career? If you make learning accessible and attractive for people, you increase the chance that they embrace a real growth mindset, and that others want to work for you too.

"This is why we offer a library full of courses that people can choose from, because that supply triggers the curiosity and demand for more habitual learning. If it's engaging, accessible and high quality, people will want to explore it. Upgrading your soft skills on an ongoing basis is key in today's workplace, and GoodHabitz fills the vital gap between 'learning is important but I don't have the motivation or know-how to get there'."

For more information please visit goodhabitz.com/en-gb/ bridge-the-learning-gap/

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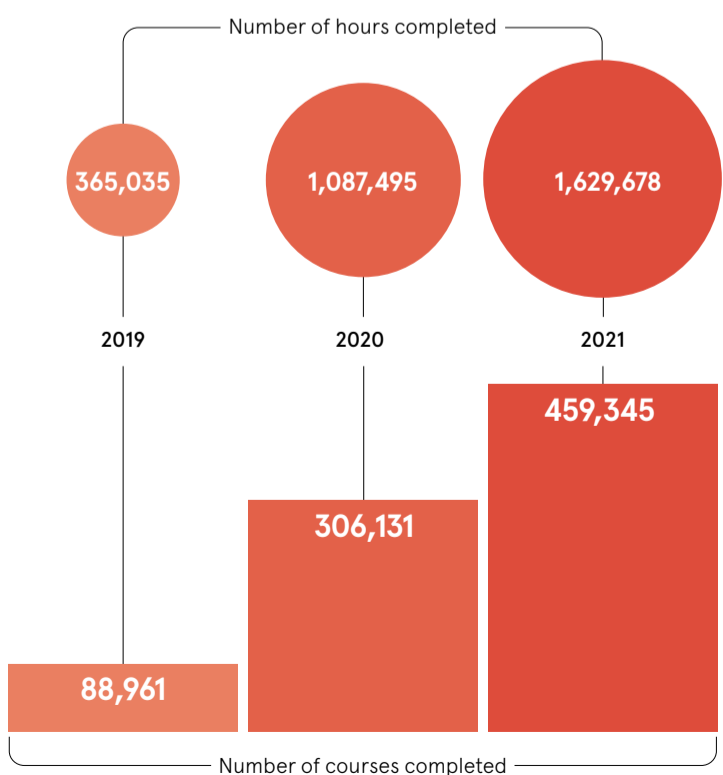
INTERVIEW

'Everyone needs to embrace digital learning – it's the new normal'

As research indicates that young workers have suffered a pandemic-induced 'development dip', **Becky Schnauffer**, senior director at LinkedIn Talent Solutions, urges employers to invest more heavily in online education

Oliver Pickup

D o you think that digital learning isn't for you or your business? How do you fancy becoming a work-from-home facilitator? What about a data detective or maybe an extended-reality immersion counsellor? If those jobs don't sound suitable, could tidewater architect, algorithm bias auditor or even cyber-calamity forecaster be more appropriate, perhaps?

If you don't believe that you're qualified for any of the above roles, you'll be far from alone. But don't feel complacent about that, because they are among the top 10 professions emerging in the wake of the Covid crisis, according to the World Economic Forum (WEF). And, given that the WEF estimates that technology will replace 85 million jobs while 97 million new ones will be created over the next four years, you may need to reassess your attitude to digital learning – and quickly. From both an individual and an organisational perspective, an urgent investment in online education would seem to be a very wise move.

The pandemic has completely disrupted the workplace. With many businesses concentrating on ensuring their immediate survival, training and development activities have gone on the back burner. People just embarking on their careers have been especially badly affected by this.

Indeed, 87% of UK business leaders polled in September by LinkedIn admitted that younger employees had suffered a "development dip" during the Covid crisis. The networking platform also surveyed 1,000 people aged between 16 and 34 about their learning experiences. More than two-thirds (69%) of these respondents agreed that the pandemic was harming their professional development.

For all those struggling to get to grips with digital learning, Becky Schnauffer, senior director of LinkedIn Talent Solutions in the UK and Ireland, can offer some valuable guidance. Her role, which she started in July after joining the organisation in 2018 as director of LinkedIn Sales Solutions, covers the company's hiring and learning activities. In essence, she helps businesses to "attract, engage, develop and retain employees".

With the skills gap widening and the war for talent raging during the so-called Great Resignation – the trend in which hordes of dissatisfied workers are quitting their jobs – her views are well worth heeding.

"While digital learning has been around for a lot longer than the pandemic, now is the time for companies to prioritise it and build it into their strategy," she argues. "An awful lot of people, not only those just now entering the workforce, have been digitally savvy from a young age. You'd therefore expect part – if not all – of their learning to be digital. They are very comfortable with this medium."

Schnauffer, who gained a degree in business management from Swansea University before joining IBM on a graduate programme in the late 1990s, recalls that "even at a technology giant, every piece of

> Digital learning is personalised, interactive, community-based, snackable and stackable

learning at that time was one-size-fits-all, delivered in a classroom and lumped together in intensive, weeklong chunks. Now, though, digital learning is personalised, interactive, community-based, snackable and stackable. Customisation of learning on the digital pathway is becoming so much more important and effective now."

Given that she has two children who are both at secondary school, Schnauffer has a vested interest in promoting digital learning. She is confident that, by the time they enter the job market, employee engagement and career development will be on a higher plane. "Everyone needs to embrace digital learning – it's the new normal. And it's going to continue evolving," she says.

Businesses that are already investing heavily in employee development stand to gain a competitive edge in attracting and retaining the best talent, Schnauffer argues. This in turn should improve their chances of achieving the holy trinity of innovation, agility and resilience.

"You want highly skilled people on your team who are always learning," she says. "Business leaders therefore have to allow their employees the time and space to develop themselves. Moreover, leaders must look ahead to where they want their businesses to be in two to three or more years, and plan how

to narrow the skills gaps that are likely to emerge."

Her point is that it's hugely more cost-effective to build a learning culture and invest in employees' skills than it is to scour the market for new talent, where the competition will be fierce. LinkedIn's new skills-building platform, the Learning Hub, has been designed to help employers do the former.

When asked how harmful it could be to organisations that don't encourage digital learning, Schnauffer quotes an aphorism widely attributed to Henry Ford: "The only thing worse than training your employees and having them leave is not training them and having them stay."

More encouragingly, LinkedIn's poll of business leaders indicated that well over three-quarters (78%) are planning to establish training courses to help their employees – particularly younger ones – adapt to new methods of working. But Schnauffer stresses that members of the C-suite must also schedule in digital learning for themselves. Progressive leaders are doing just that on the LinkedIn Learning platform, which offers almost 17,000 courses across a wide range of categories.
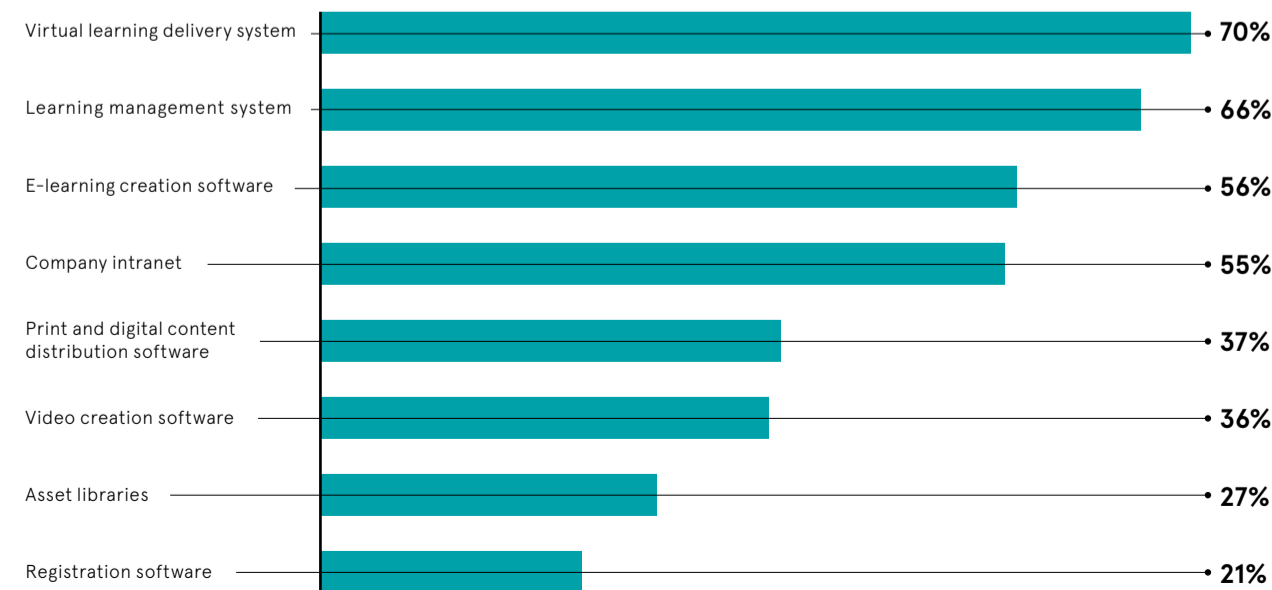
The most popular course over the past year has been one about detecting and avoiding unconscious bias, followed by one on strategic thinking. Other subjects in the top 10 include inclusivity, public speaking and the agile approach to project management.

"You only grow and improve yourself by building your knowledge," Schnauffer says. "And digital learning makes the experience convenient. It's always available, relevant, personalised, and enjoyable."

Business leaders, take note and act accordingly – or watch your organisations wither on the vine. ●

THE MANY METHODS OF DIGITAL LEARNING
Mimeo, 2020

Technologies used by learning and development teams in North America

Virtual learning delivery system	70%
Learning management system	66%
E-learning creation software	56%
Company intranet	55%
Print and digital content distribution software	37%
Video creation software	36%
Asset libraries	27%
Registration software	21%

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- Pierre Dubuc, CEO and co-founder, OpenClassrooms **"**

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