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Designing Learning Programs for a Hybrid Workplace

by Heidi Grant and Tal Goldhamer July 06, 2022

Summary.

Many company leaders are anxious about developing talent in a hybrid work environment. But because virtual learning can be scaled relatively easily; delivered flexibly and in ways that accommodate other ongoing work; and spaced to allow opportunities for learning to be embedded into long-term memory, built upon, and practiced, well-designed virtual learning has been shown to be as effective as in-person learning — and often more so. There are, however, a few legitimate challenges with virtual and hybrid learning. Fortunately, each is a solvable problem when you're armed with the strategies the authors present for keeping learners' attention, managing their energy, and making the social aspects of virtual learning more comfortable (and less awkward).

The shift to remote and hybrid work, which is likely to be lasting or permanent for many organizations, has brought enormous amounts of anxiety about how to attract, develop, and retain talent when we aren't always (or even often) physically together. Developing talent feels to many like an almost impossible task due in large part to the common misconception that formal and informal learning are best done when people are in the same room.

Why do so many people believe this? Mostly because that's the world we know — the one that feels familiar to us and therefore “right.” But just because you did most of your learning in physical classrooms doesn't mean that it was the only (or best) way for you to learn. Yes, you learned things. However, do you really remember everything you learned? Was it the most effective and efficient way of teaching you? If you're really honest, how many times did you find that you had to teach yourself the material in preparation for the exam because the class itself did nothing for you? And then, after taking the test, how quickly did you forget it all?

One of the many ironies of the human brain is that even though it's exceptionally good at retaining new information, people are *terrible* judges of when we are or aren't learning well. Decades of research show that we simply

can't tell. We know when we find learning interesting and we know when we find it easy or difficult, but we don't actually know if we're learning *in the moment*. And, given that we don't know when we're learning well, it's easy to end up with a lot of beliefs about what good learning looks like that turn out to be myths.

It turns out that great learning is about great design — design that considers how human brains actually encode and embed information. In fact, well-designed virtual learning has been shown to be as effective as in-person learning, and often more so. This is because virtual learning can be scaled relatively easily, delivered flexibly and in ways that accommodate other ongoing work, and spaced to allow learning opportunities to be embedded into long-term memory, built upon, and practiced. For example, one meta-analysis of 96 studies showed virtual learning to be 19% more impactful than in-person learning on average. In fact, being in person can often undermine the quality of learning because those experiences often force learners to spend many back-to-back hours in workshops to squeeze in as much as possible, with little time to digest or practice what's being taught.

There are, however, a few legitimate challenges with virtual and hybrid learning. Fortunately, each is a solvable problem when you're armed with the following strategies.

Holding Attention

Multitasking and distraction are even more tempting when people feel they won't be “caught” and when alternative activities (such as answering emails) are easily accessible. Here are two ways to keep people focused:

Make the content engaging.

Frankly, this is something that we should have always been doing, and it's even more important now. Engaging doesn't have to mean “fun” or “exciting” (though it's great if you can pull those off). Fundamentally, engagement with learning comes from making it clear how the knowledge is relevant to the learner, focusing on what is non-obvious or surprising, and confirming that the information is presented in ways that are highly *fluent*, meaning that they create ease of understanding. Making people learn things they may never use in their role, telling them things they already know (e.g., “feedback is important”), and reading off slides with small-font paragraphs are great ways

to lose the attention of your virtual learner (or any human, for that matter, whether in person or virtually).

Skilled facilitation and a sense of what your learners actually want to learn is key. Throughout the EY organization, we increasingly use an intentional combination of on-demand e-learning (e.g., interactive content, videos, or recorded webinars that a learner can access at any time) plus virtual live experiences with skilled facilitators delivering content and leading discussions via a videoconferencing platform. The former is a great way to provide foundational knowledge in a flexible way, and the latter creates the opportunity for feedback and practice.

Keep learners on their toes.

There is a reason your high school science teacher loved to give surprise quizzes. They knew that putting students on the spot — for example, by calling on people frequently and at random — was a great way to make sure that everyone came to class prepared and paid attention. This doesn't stop being true when learners transition to the adult world of learning. At the EY organization, we use unexpected polling, call on learners to contribute, keep it interactive, and encourage learners to keep their cameras on. No matter how old you are, no one likes to get caught napping in class.

Managing Energy

The world of hybrid work brings new sources of exhaustion. For example, people seem more likely to book themselves in back-to-back meetings than ever before, rarely getting up from their desks for hours and hours at a time. In addition, having to see yourself on camera in virtual meetings has been shown to heighten self-awareness (similar to the effect of looking at yourself in a mirror). Research shows that increases in self-awareness can have positive effects because we often behave in ways that are more in line with our values when we have to watch ourselves doing it. However, constant self-awareness isn't natural — all of that extra self-monitoring and vigilance is leaving us drained at the end of every meeting, with little time to recover before the next. Here are three ways to mitigate this exhaustion:

Give it a rest.

In any learning experience, you need to make sure people are getting five- to

10-minute breaks for every 30 to 60 minutes of learning. The longer the learning session, the longer the break. And activities done in breakout rooms are *not* breaks. Because they involve interacting with other people — often people you don't know well — they're energy depleting in their own way, especially for introverts. A break is a *break*: an opportunity to do something else and put gas back in the tank.

Encourage replenishing breaks.

In most learning experiences, if you give people five minutes of break time, they check their email. The impulse is understandable; however, the result is that learners don't really benefit. Facilitators need to *strongly* emphasize that it's important to step away from their desks if possible. Move around, change your view. Do something you actually enjoy doing, such as your daily Wordle, or have a healthy snack. Activities that shift perspective and that are intrinsically pleasant are the most effective ways to replenishes energy and focus.

Encourage learners to stop looking at themselves.

Some virtual learning platforms, such as Zoom, allow you to turn off self-view so that you can see other participants without having to stare at yourself. This is an option worth pointing out to learners, who are unlikely to know how much all that self-awareness is draining their energy. If you aren't on a platform with this feature, a simple sticky note strategically placed gets the job done.

Making the Social Elements Comfortable

Breakout sessions where learners share insights and apply new knowledge together to solve problems are an important part of the learning experience. They are often also a valuable *networking* opportunity, allowing employees to make connections they might otherwise never make. Unfortunately, virtual breakout and networking sessions feel really weird, and we don't have norms or schemas for how to do them. *Norms* are our sense of how things are supposed to happen. For example, in the U.S., walking on the right side of a hallway or sidewalk is a norm, as is saying thank you when someone holds open a door for you. *Schemas* are like mental “maps” for how to engage in complex activities step-by-step. For example, odds are you have a schema for dining in a restaurant — you know everyone's role and the order in which

things happen.

When human beings lack a sense of the norms or a schema for a situation, they panic a bit. Everyone feels uncomfortable, and nothing particularly fruitful happens. Here are two ways to make the social aspects of virtual learning less awkward:

Be prescriptive.

If you want your learners to have a great breakout room or networking experience, tell them what they're supposed to say and do. At the EY organization, we give them a "script" (so to speak) for their time together. We assign roles, provide clear instructions, and create a shared set of expectations about what will happen. Armed with that clarity, breakouts can begin to feel more natural and normal, and a lot less weird.

Keep it short.

In addition to lacking norms and schemas for how to network virtually, people don't always have an easy way to escape a conversation that isn't going well. In the days of in-person networking, it was usually easy to make up an excuse to have to be "somewhere else." In virtual rooms, it's easy to feel trapped, which makes people want to avoid putting themselves in those situations in the first place. Keep networking opportunities short and give people examples of what to talk about so they find it easy and comfortable using the time.

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Virtual and hybrid learning can be equally and often more impactful than in-person learning. With a bit of intention and a focus on great design, we can overcome the challenges and help all of our people become better in this new hybrid world.

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