

Talent Mangement  
During the Post-  
Pandemic  
Transition CAHRS  
Virtual Working  
Group Series:

Evolving Learning  
and Development

## Session 3: Evolving Learning and Development October 5, 2021

As we slowly recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, many organizations are in the midst of strategically deciding their work model in the “new normal.” The “new normal” has created challenges for learning and development functions. What’s the right way to offer reskilling and upskilling programs? How to make space for learning at a time when employees are already stretched thin? What are the new practices and challenges in leadership development? How to best measure learning needs and learning outcomes? These questions have been on the radar for many learning and development (L&D) professionals. In this CAHRS working group, CAHRS Director and William J. Conaty Professor Brad Bell led a discussion about how companies are evolving their learning and development portfolios as they navigate the post-pandemic transition. Below is a summary of the key themes and best practices from the working group.

### DISCUSSION

#### TAKEAWAYS

1. **Investments:** While many organizations have acknowledged the importance of learning and development for navigating the disruption caused by the pandemic, investments have not always kept pace. Against this backdrop, virtual learning or blended learning is trending.
2. **Reskilling/Upskilling:** To combat new market requirement and adjust to new work models, companies are doubling down on efforts to reskill and upskill their workforces. Having dedicated learning time and a structured learning framework may help facilitate these efforts.
3. **Increasing participation:** To promote participation in learning, companies can encourage small/bite-size learning to reduce the time commitment for each learning session. Storytelling can also be very powerful, as both a learning and marketing method.
4. **Leadership development:** During the pandemic, many companies put some or all of their leadership development on hold. As they look to reboot these initiatives, there are a number of issues that will need to be considered. The first thing to do is to identify what type of leader is needed in the “new normal.” It is also important to consider a broader array of delivery mechanisms. Compared to before the pandemic, virtual learning is more acceptable to executives. They also are more likely to attend virtual conversations with front line employees and middle managers.
5. **Learning modality:** Companies have increased their utilization of virtual learning, but it has both pros and cons. Some of the benefits include making it easier to identify star learners and know their learning journeys. It’s also easier to schedule executives and international colleagues to increase engagement. On the flip side, opportunities for socialization and interpersonal experiences are attenuated.

13  
participants  
from  
12  
CAHRS Companies:

Bloomberg  
Bristol Myers Squibb  
Cigna  
CNH Industrial  
Colgate Palmolive  
CUBIC  
Daiichi Sankyo  
Manulife  
Medtronic  
Samsung Electronics America  
Terex  
Verizon

CAHRS  
Evolving Learning  
and Development  
Virtual Working  
Group -  
October 5, 2021

Talent Mangement  
During the Post-  
Pandemic  
Transition CAHRS  
Virtual Working  
Group Series:

Evolving Learning  
and Development

- 6. Need assessment and outcome measurement:** Different positions have their own characteristics and thus distinct needs for training and development. Virtual learning platforms can better adapt to various needs. For training outcomes, the objective scores might not change or even decrease, but the behavioral changes are reflected in stories that people share.

### **Experiences in Reskilling and Upskilling the Workforce**

As we slowly recover from the pandemic, the economic and social environment have changed significantly. Market needs, a new work model, and new skill requirements, have brought forth the urgency to reskill and upskill the workforce, as reflected in each company. This strategic goal requires support from the leadership and an institutionalized learning structure. One CAHRS company shared its best practice with the group. Its HR team pushed for a monthly dedicated time for employee learning. During this time, many learning programs under the same overarching theme were offered concurrently to meet the various learning needs. The programs were mainly provided through a third-party online platform, and supplemented with other modalities such as in-person lectures and panel discussions. The key takeaway is that institutionalized learning helps to secure the learning opportunities and to strengthen the learning culture.

### **Promoting Participation in Learning and Development**

As we navigate the latter stages of the pandemic, companies are moving back to full-capacity operation. Meanwhile, the extended duration of virtual work has increased burnout among many employees, leaving little capacity for individual learning and development. To promote learning in this context, CAHRS companies have shared many useful tips. First, small and bite-size learning can be both highly effective and easier for employees to accommodate in their busy schedules. Sometimes, employees just need a short and direct answer to a pressing question, which can be provided through a quick online module or a conversation with a peer or expert. Second, we can adopt marketing strategies to highlight the benefits of specific learning programs. For example, successful learning stories come in handy to enlist interest among potential learners; enthusiastic quotes from previous participants are powerful testimonies as well. Third, the learning content itself is important. CAHRS companies praised the power of storytelling again as it enhances experiential learning, improves engagement, and facilitates spontaneous conversations among employees about certain subjects.

### **Resuming Leadership Development**

At the beginning of the pandemic, leadership development was put on hold within many companies because of the sheer amount of work on other fronts. Now, companies have more bandwidth to resume these initiatives. The first step is to identify the type of leader needed in the “new normal,” which can be informed through conversations with the business side and the senior leadership team. There are also new trends in implementing leadership development. CAHRS companies reported consistently that executives were more open to virtual learning experiences than before the pandemic. Executives have enjoyed virtual

Talent Mangement  
During the Post-  
Pandemic  
Transition CAHRS  
Virtual Working  
Group Series:

Evolving Learning  
and Development

opportunities to share experiences and challenges with each other. The convenience of virtual engagement has also allowed executives to have more conversations with middle managers and frontline employees. Virtuality has benefited leadership development at all levels.

### Advantages and Disadvantages of Virtual Platforms

Beyond facilitating leadership development, virtual platforms have other advantages. Virtual platforms have made it possible to engage more diverse audiences in learning events. For example, running events with more international audiences has increased opportunities to learn best practices from different locations and geographies. In addition, metrics generated by virtual platforms make it easier to identify star learners and to understand their successful learning journeys. Further, these powerful stories can be used as marketing materials to potential learners.

On the other hand, virtual platforms potentially decrease interpersonal interactions and thus the opportunity to learn from others at work. Also, from the trainers' perspective, lecturing virtually requires more cognitive resources and greater investment in promoting engagement. Trainers themselves need upskilling and support as well.

### Needs Assessment and Outcome Measurement

Different occupations and positions within a company usually have distinct characteristics and thus unique learning and development needs. For example, employees at the shop floor may not respond well to online training. While in-person training might be challenging during a pandemic, we can still accommodate the need for interpersonal interaction through small gatherings. Overall, need assessment becomes vital for L&D professionals to get the greatest return from learning investments.

As for outcome measurement, CAHRS companies reported that they use both objective and subjective measurements to evaluate the effectiveness of learning. Objective measurements are usually engagement scores. These scores partly reflect the quality and availability of learning opportunities, but we need to interpret them with caution. For instance, engagement scores might decrease compared with pre-pandemic scores not because learning is less available but because people are tired of virtual and isolated learning experiences. Subjective feedback and behavioral changes can be used to supplement engagement metrics. L&D professionals can evaluate the effectiveness of their programs through learning stories, word of mouth communications, and observed behavioral changes.

This Summary Report was prepared by Brad Bell and Note Taker Chang Cheng for participants of the "Evolving Learning and Development" Virtual Working Group.

**The Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies (CAHRS) is an international center serving corporate human resources leaders and their companies by providing critical tools for building and leading high performing HR organizations. CAHRS' mission is to bring together Partners and the ILR School's world-renowned HR Studies faculty to investigate, translate and apply the latest HR research into practice excellence.**

CAHRS  
Evolving Learning  
and Development  
Virtual Working  
Group -  
October 5, 2021