



# What does the **'new normal'** look like for L&D and the workplace?

Key takeaways from our virtual facilitated session, attended by thirty five global L&D and HR professionals.





## Introduction

On Thursday 25th June, Hemsley Fraser hosted a virtually-facilitated discussion led by our in-house experts, Nick Mongan - Virtual and Digital Learning Consultant, and Valerie Nichols - Executive Consultant.

The main topic for discussion was the role of learning development and the new workplace, whether that being virtual or physical. We discussed challenges, approaches, experiences and thoughts regarding the next phase of relaxed restrictions, easing of lockdown, and as organisations regain a semblance of control.



**Valerie Nichols**  
Executive Consultant



**Nick Mongan**  
Virtual & Digital Learning  
Consultant

The new  
**'business as  
usual'**

**Supporting  
employees**  
throughout the  
return

**Topics  
included**

The leader of  
the **future**

Building  
**resilience** for  
the unknown



## Not the 'new normal' but the 'next normal'

A quick poll revealed that 94 per cent of participants did not believe that L&D will return to the way it was pre-pandemic, indicating potential further challenges and adjustments ahead.

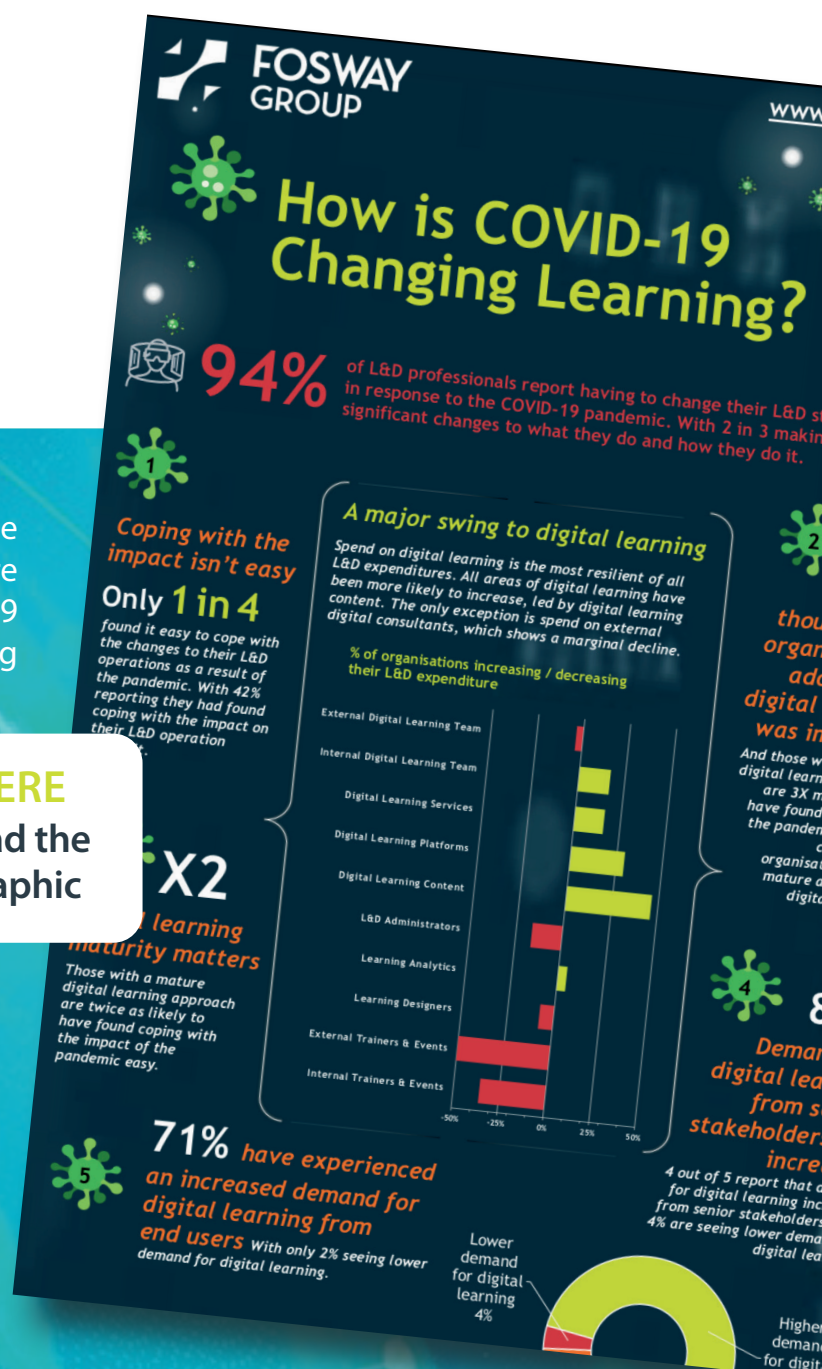
Most participants agreed that there would, in fact, be several phases of returning to work, each of which will need to be managed carefully. As organizations deliberate over their new working policies, it was noted that flexibility is the most commonly desired aspect of the next phase. Rather than a binary choice between office working and working from home, employees would like the autonomy to choose their hours and place of work.

Some commented that there may never be a total return to previous working patterns, while others agreed that even if this was the eventual goal, there were several steps to be taken first. Managing a displaced workforce is demanding in itself, but the mixture of office-based and home-based employees presents several additional challenges for HR and L&D.

As a group, we reviewed the FOSWAY GROUP's research where they highlighted how COVID-19 is changing learning

[CLICK HERE](#)  
to download the  
full infographic

“There may never be a total return to previous working patterns”





## Impact on working relationships

The group cited concerns over potential clashes between returning furloughed staff and those who have been working continuously. Valerie pointed out that both parties may have a reason to resent the other. Furloughed workers will perhaps feel less valued and begrudge having no input into recent business decisions, and those who have remained working may lament that they have put in additional work for no reward, while their furloughed counterparts have benefitted from what could be viewed as paid holiday.



One attendee suggested that relationships may be impacted because of a lack of face-to-face contact, questioning whether there would be a loss of cohesion and team spirit. Conversely, others remarked that the lockdown had created a sense of camaraderie, with people interacting more often and more casually. Many of the group had experienced the same but were concerned about how to continue this into the next phase.

Interestingly, it was raised that an increase in flexible working will mean that junior employees have fewer opportunities to learn through observation. There was a feeling that L&D teams will bear the responsibility for replacing or replicating this kind of learning in the 'new normal'.



## The importance of regular communication

When discussing the impact on working relationships, several of the attendees stressed the importance of clear and regular communications throughout the pandemic and moving forward. Furloughed employees, for example, will need to be updated on changes to business strategy, and this is much easier to digest if delivered in real-time. Not only that, but regular communications can help to combat feelings of isolation, and help furloughed employees feel an alignment with the organization.

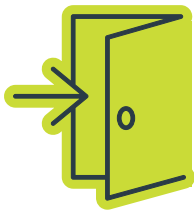
Valerie added the importance of inclusive communication, suggesting that some employees will find it much easier to adapt than others. There must be support mechanisms in place to assist workers who struggle compared to their colleagues.



// *There must be support mechanisms in place to assist workers* //

## A new onboarding experience

Most of the participants had onboarding schemes in place to reintegrate furloughed workers to the organization. It was observed that returning to work may not mean returning to the workplace and that furloughed employees may need assistance with home working, as many who worked continuously did at the beginning of the pandemic. This must be handled with care, as anything else would risk widening the divide between furloughed and non-furloughed employees.



Some attendees stressed the importance of expressing the new realities of the physical workplace. While many employees are desperate to return to the office, the environment will not be the same as it was before. One participant suggested that workers may not gain the benefits they are anticipating from returning; could sitting at a socially distanced desk be more isolating than a home-working scenario, for example? As one attendee put it, "work is no longer a place you go, it is what you do". It may be that in both realities, home-based and office-based, HR and L&D teams need to do more to combat feelings of isolation.



## Redefining digital learning

When asked what forms of learning participants had been using throughout the lockdown, most said that they had taken a blended approach, with self-directed and on-demand forms of learning, such as podcasts, infographic and videos combined with virtual instructor-led sessions and coaching. One suggested that learning within the flow of work can help to bridge any gaps created by junior employees being unable to observe their colleagues.

Though many have been using e-learning, several attendees reported that this was not popular internally, as previous iterations had been clunky and lacking in engagement resulting in a negative

legacy. Once learners had used new e-learning resources their perception improved, but encouraging uptake in the face of a poor reputation is a challenge.

One participant warned of digital learning suffering the same fate. Some organisations have been too quick to move to digital and have done so without making any changes to the content, facilitators or material. The group agreed that digital learning requires dedicated expertise.



*“It is important to shift perceptions surrounding the negative legacy of e-learning.”*



## Managing performance reviews

Performance reviews pose a double challenge: evaluating an individual remotely and delivering the review virtually. One of our participants stated that reviews did not need to be held face-to-face, but that employees would feel uncomfortable if other changes had not been managed in a similar way. Most agreed that video was essential in delivering performance reviews.

A particular concern raised was how to rate behaviors against existing frameworks, especially as attitude may be very different on a short phone call compared to the rest of the time at work. This can also make it difficult to determine who



may be struggling, unless they are forthcoming, leading to increased calls for mental health support.

Most participants shared the sense that employees should not be penalised for work produced over the lockdown period, but that equally, organisations may not be in a position to pay out annual bonuses this year. Our attendees stressed the importance of creating a sense of togetherness and leaders acting with high levels of emotional intelligence to navigate through this period.

Some were taking this as an opportunity to reset and re-examine structural frameworks. Moving forward, there is likely to be less emphasis on observing behavior and performance in real-time, therefore, managers must be developed to ask revealing questions and lead conversations, as well as, build trust to enable an honest exchange of feedback.

*“This is an opportunity to reset and re-examine structural frameworks”*

## New skillsets in demand

There was much discussion surrounding the most important traits for leaders in the new or next normal. A breakout discussion revealed that the most commonly desired skills would be the ability to build trust, communicate with clarity and set clear expectations, and lead with honesty.

While there was some agreement that ‘good managers’ in the pre-COVID19 working world may not be ‘good managers’ in the new environment, others stated that these are all traits leaders should have already established. One participant noted that it could depend on the individual, noting that a legacy leader may not display these skills so readily, but would have a lot of valuable knowledge. These leaders

may have taken part in soft skills development before the pandemic, but would not necessarily rely on these behaviors out of instinct in the new environment.

Many of the participants agreed that learning agility, the ability to learn and adapt quickly, is a desirable skill in itself, and one that will serve all employees well. Some organizations were already considering how to develop this in their workers.



## Impact on future leaders

For the leaders of the future, the biggest adjustment will be managing an increasingly remote and flexible workforce. Much as we have been preparing leaders to manage a multi-generational organization, tomorrow's leaders will also need to navigate a workforce with very different wants and needs.

Digital fluency will be a must, with leaders not only understanding how to use technology, but also being able to realize how this will transform the business and impact its people. All attendees agreed that considerate communications would be a must, with one participant adding that none of us will forget how we have been treated throughout this period.

Future leaders will also need to be more inclusive. Forced home-working has highlighted for many the way in which something can be a challenge to one person and opportunity to another. Leaders will need to be flexible, and appreciative of the fact that employees have different expectations. The majority agreed that there would be a need for upskilling and reskilling post-pandemic.



## Maintaining engagement, productivity and positivity

Happily, many of our participants shared that the past few months had been marked by an increase in engagement, productivity and positivity. One stated that leaders engaging virtually via video on a more regular basis has been a real positive from the situation and has created an even stronger connection within the organization.

Most agreed that this form of regular engagement is a habit that they will seek to encourage and continue as we move into the next phase. Leaders who were previously uncomfortable with video have had to learn along with employees, forming bonds and displaying a level of vulnerability.

Nearly all of our participants were implementing new ways to increase engagement, benefitting from the lessons learned during the lockdown period.





## No.1 priority for L&D when budgets are under less pressure

There is no guarantee or timeline for when things will return to normal or when there is less restrictions on budgets, but it's important for L&D to be prepared and express with clarity what their priorities are when resources are made available. Various participants shared that their main priority for their future was 'Leadership Development', as a group there was a lot of emphasis on the leaders of the future and what skillsets and traits would be essential, so there is no surprise this is a priority for L&D functions. Other priorities shared were communication, cultural learning and digital fluency.







On behalf of Hemsley Fraser, we'd like to say a big thank you to all of our participants who took part in the facilitated session and shared their insights.

**UK:**

**+44 345 071 2801**

W: [hemsleyfraser.co.uk](https://hemsleyfraser.co.uk)

E: [enquiries@hemsleyfraser.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@hemsleyfraser.co.uk)

**Germany:**

**+49 69 9203 7568 0**

W: [hemsleyfraser.de](https://hemsleyfraser.de)

E: [info@hemsleyfraser.de](mailto:info@hemsleyfraser.de)

**US:**

**+1 888-559-0074**

W: [hemsleyfraser.com](https://hemsleyfraser.com)

E: [ustraining@hemsleyfraser.com](mailto:ustraining@hemsleyfraser.com)

**Canada**

**+1 438 526 8808**

W: [hemsleyfraser.com](https://hemsleyfraser.com)

E: [ustraining@hemsleyfraser.com](mailto:ustraining@hemsleyfraser.com)