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Reimagining in-person learning

The power of human connection

Introduction

In a world where communication is constant, yet increasingly superficial, the importance of in-person human connection has never been greater.

Our hybrid world of virtual meetings is now the norm, leaving little room for handshakes, hallway chats, or shared energy. Emails, messages, and social feeds have replaced conversations; the “water cooler chat” now often happens with our pets or partners. Algorithms increasingly shape our preferences and apps are running our routines from fitness to finances. Even where office-based work has increased, much of the working day remains dominated by virtual meetings, missing the benefits of shared in-person experiences.

When we consider the world of learning, there has been a huge swing from in-person to digital and virtual learning over the past six years, and this has largely remained in place despite the new normal of hybrid working.



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In this paper, we suggest that the time is right to “reimagine” how we use in-person learning as part of a blended learning experience. Intentionally combining modalities at different stages, using each for what it does best, with in-person experiences elevating the moments that most benefit from shared energy, collaboration and connection.

Rebalancing how and where we use in-person experiences as part of blended experiences is a strategic response to build the critical capabilities needed in today’s organisations.



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Connected but **isolated**

Recent research shows that anxiety about being offline is now commonplace, and **nomophobia** the fear of being without one's phone or connection causes significant stress. *American Journal of College Health (2025)*.

One in three U.S. adults reports being online "almost constantly." Yet as screen time rises, so do loneliness and isolation, undermining mental health, collective wellbeing and causing significant business challenges, along with declining work performance, with loneliness-related absenteeism costing U.S. employers \$154 billion annually. *Cyberpsychology, Behaviour, and Social Networking (2025)*.

Neuroscience shows that our need for human connection is deeply wired: positive social interactions activate the brain's reward systems, at the same time social exclusion trigger neural responses that mirror the experience of physical pain. *Eisenberger et al., 2003; Novembre et al., 2015; Eisenberger, 2015*.

As our world has continued to become increasingly digital, online and automated our "human connectedness" in society, work and leisure is diminishing. Will our innate need for human interaction spur us to intentionally design when and how we reconnect more in-person?

"Addressing loneliness requires a balance of digital and physical solutions"

Cyberpsychology, Behaviour, and Social Networking (2025).

"Physical interaction may be the key to restoring social connection"

Psychology today (2025).

The benefits & balance of in-person connection



“Organisations with stronger connectedness are 5.4× more likely to be agile, 3.2× more likely to have satisfied customers, and 2.3× more likely to have engaged employees”. *HBR (2023)*.



Beyond wellbeing, in-person interactions deepen relationships, accelerate collaboration, and lift performance, outcomes that are harder to replicate on screen. *Forbes (2025)*.

As we navigate work in an AI era, we must sharpen the human capabilities with the highest value; our emotional intelligence, empathy, judgement, creativity, culture-building and collaboration. Being together in person allows far better reading of body language, understanding of the complexities of team dynamics, the subtle cues that fuel collaboration and create workplace cultures.

In 2025, the World Health Organization released a roadmap calling for global action to shift social norms and expand opportunities for meaningful connection.

“As technology reshapes our lives, we must ensure it strengthens, not weakens, human connection.”

WHO (2025)

Balancing tech & connectedness

We don't have to choose between being connected to our tech or being connected to humans. We can have both. Blended learning architectures work best when technology and in-person connection are integrated, using digital and virtual components to raise awareness, launch events and build foundational knowledge. The in-person moments accelerate skill acquisition through immersion, practice, and deeper interpersonal connections.

“The key to success isn't choosing between people or technology - it's finding the right balance”.

Forbes (2025).

“To build genuine human connection, you need to be more systemic in your approach” HBR (2025).

Used wisely, technology wisely we can create space and intentionally reinvest that time in high-value personal, connected, experiences that have impact. The evidence is clear: digital transformation, and now AI, bring real benefits. Hybrid work can improve balance; AI can enhance productivity. However, without a clear strategy for connection, we risk losing the trust, collaboration, and innovation that make teams thrive.

Now is the time to reimagine and rebalance how in-person learning is used within your blend. Thoughtfully designed blended experiences can strengthen connection between colleagues and teams, build trust and shared experience, and maximise the unique value that being together creates.



“In-person events can build trust, foster innovation and create a sense of belonging that transcends the limitations of screen time.”

Forbes (2025).

The rise and role of in-person training

Virtual training remains a core component of the learning landscape offering cost effective, convenient solutions and globally consistent delivery. At the same time, blended and in-person training has been steadily returning. Our annual learning survey shows usage rising from 66% (2022) to 87% (2025). *(Hemsley Fraser L&D Impact Survey, 2025).*

The annual Hemsley L&D Impact Surveys reflects an ongoing shift toward more balanced learning journeys, where organisations are curating an intentional mix of virtual, digital, social, and in-person experiences. The question is no longer whether learning should be “virtual or in-person?” but rather how to combine modalities to achieve the strongest outcomes.

As learning portfolios gradually shift to encompass more in-person components, how do you know if you have the right balance? And when should you review and re-balance to achieve the learning outcomes you need?

87%

2025

66%

2022

Organisations in the UK/US
utilising in-person training.

How to get the balance right

Learning best suited to in-person delivery

- ✓ Practical, hands-on skill development – where practice, observation and immediate adjustment matter most (Springer Nature, 2024)
- ✓ Skills requiring real-time feedback and adaptive facilitation – such as coaching, management capability and communication (American College of Education, 2025)
- ✓ Collaborative capability building – including teamwork, facilitation and creative problem-solving (California Learning Resources Network, 2025)
- ✓ Social and emotional skill development – such as relationship building, negotiation and complex problem solving (California Learning Resources Network, 2025)

Learning well suited to virtual delivery

- ✓ Knowledge acquisition and conceptual understanding – where the primary outcome is comprehension rather than behaviour change
- ✓ Learning that benefits from shared motivation and momentum – where being part of a cohort increases engagement and completion
- ✓ Lower cognitive-load topics – where content is simpler and requires limited practice or reinforcement
- ✓ Community-building in a digital context – where establishing connection and continuity online is a valuable outcome in its own right

Seen together, these two lists illustrate why the blended approach is essential, and how components can complement each other. Virtual and digital learning experiences continue to deliver time efficient and scalable benefits; whilst in-person learning offers a powerful antidote to some of our hybrid work challenges.

Use it for sparking engagement, innovation and problem solving, building human capability, and team connectedness while mitigating issues around isolation, loneliness, digital fatigue, and burnout.

What should an in-person learning experience deliver and look like today?

A great in-person learning experience isn't about sharing a room - it's about how deliberately that time is used. When designed with intent, in-person moments create stronger connection, clearer thinking, and real, applied capability across the learning journey.

Before

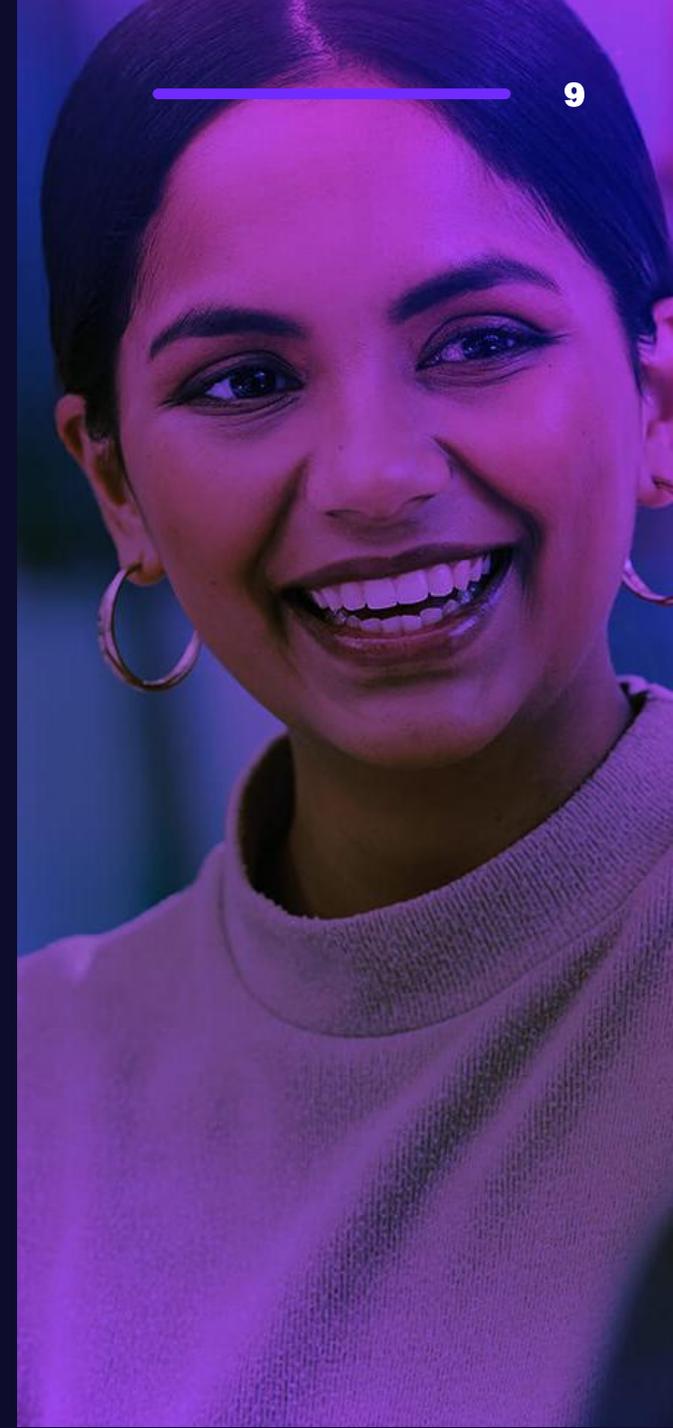
Prime learners with short, digital or virtual touchpoints to build relevance and spark excitement and curiosity. Give people the foundations of theory and instill the training need, or problem to solve, ahead of coming together, this avoids “chalk and talk” or poor use of time together.

During

Learning should feel lived, not delivered. Content needs to support the experience, not dominate it. Activities should engage and make space for deeper connection and real conversations, replicate real world experiences and allow for feedback and adaption.

After

Blend digital tools, nudges, and social learning opportunities to support accountability and embed application. Provide simple tools or prompts that help learners apply concepts back in their flow of work, turning insight into meaningful actions





Ultimately, in-person learning should provide what digital spaces struggle to offer: room to think, talk, experiment, and connect. It should leave them inspired, energised, clearer on what to do next, and better equipped for the realities of their day-to-day work.

Effective in-person learning goes beyond what happens “in the room” Good experiences go beyond 2D and 3D, instead all dimensions are factored, to ensure the human experience unfolds to deliver meaningful and deliberate learning outcomes which improve performance long after the day ends.

“In-person teams generated 15% to 20% more ideas than virtual teams”

Stanford Business School (2024)

Are you considering a return to more in-person learning events?

When deciding if in-person is the best format consider these three factors;



Learning outcomes

- Does the subject and outcome require real world practice and discussion?
- Will the experience enhance collaboration, connection and collective problem solving?
- Could learners achieve the same outcome independently or virtually?



The learners

- Would learners need the opportunity, time, and space to intentionally step away, and switch off, from daily demands and engage in an in-person event?
- Is the perceived benefits and value strong enough to drive full participation, so learners prioritise this in their schedules?
- Is support available from their managers, stakeholders and wider environment to attend in-person and to support putting the learning into action?

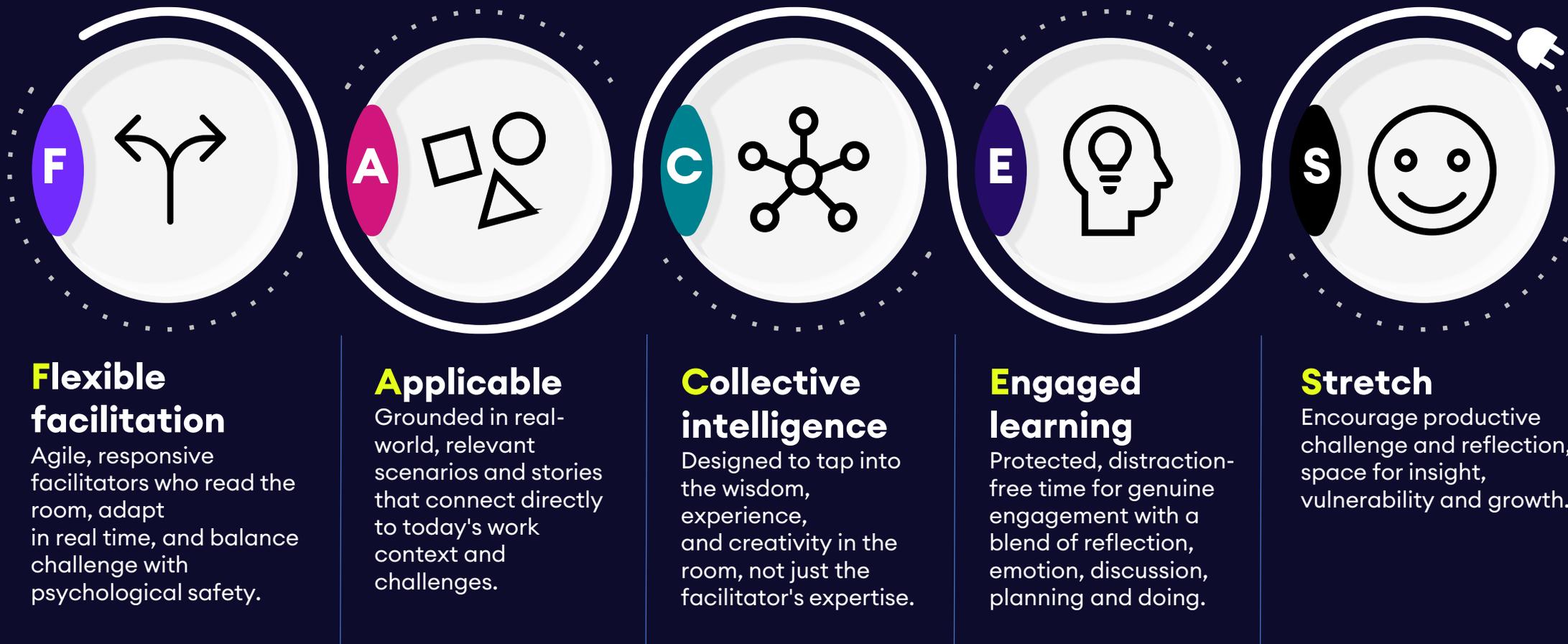


The logistics

- Is there commitment to the whole learning journey – before, during, and after – not just “time in the room”?
- How will the in-person experience connect with digital, virtual, and social components of the learning journey to reinforce and sustain behaviour change?
- What other elements can enhance the event, making it an engaging memorable experience, beyond traditional learning delivery?
- Will the challenges of bringing the right learners together in-person, take so long to achieve or be so costly, that it would outweigh the benefits of in-person learning?

Design Principles: The **FACES** Framework

To deliver in-person experiences that feel modern, meaningful, and integrate blended components, programmes can be shaped around **the FACES framework**:



Done well and with intention, these principles create a meaningful human experience that strengthens culture, builds trust, and enhances performance.



Getting started - reimagining in-person learning

With a backdrop of constant change, tech transformation and digital overload, human connection is not the soft stuff, it is foundational to resilience, performance, and progress. Right now, it may be one of the most important investments any organisation can make.

In-person learning can be a critical component in building connection in your organisation, and connection is essential to achieve learning outcomes for some of the most critical capabilities for the future.

The three steps to consider

Rebalance your current learning offer. Review learning outcomes, and consider where in-person connection can add more value, than other modalities.

Re-imagine and engage learners and stakeholders on what in-person learning can uniquely deliver and how it can bring the connection needed for wider business performance.

Re-design your programmes, where appropriate, to include engaging in-person experiences that maximise connection, shared energy and collaboration as part of the overall blend.

This is a clear opportunity to use well designed in-person learning experiences to strengthen connection, resilience and improve performance:

- ✓ Meaningful connection
- ✓ Shared energy
- ✓ Space to think and plan beyond the noise

These experiences don't just feel good, they directly strengthen trust, collaboration, capability, and cohesion that humans need to thrive.

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