

How do we prevent digital fatigue in **learning**?

By Ben Clarke, Head of Hemsley Fraser US

Introduction

Following a truly unprecedented 18 months, we've all felt the pressure, many feeling anxious, stressed or burnt out at one time or another. Now, as we move forwards without restrictions, we are still far from 'normal' and an environment centred around constant change and uncertainty continues to cause feelings of disengagement.

Part of what's driving increased fatigue is our growing reliance on screens. Most organisations have now settled into some form of hybrid working, with at least some of the week spent working from home. Meetings frequently take place virtually, rather than face to face.

Learning has helped to guide employees through this period of change but the discipline faces its own challenges now. How to adapt traditional techniques to the virtual/hybrid environment? How to incorporate physical experiences in the new normal? How to deliver impactful and engaging learning amid changing participant expectations?

Crucially, how can learning avoid adding to digital fatigue, perhaps even provide better variety and relevance to stimulate engagement?



How does learning fit within your new organisational culture?

Some organisations were better equipped than others to manage the switch to remote working. Those who had already implemented virtual, asynchronous and blended learning strategies were able to support their employees with learning more easily. Throughout the pandemic, many businesses developed or adapted learning solutions to fit the needs of the organisation in the moment.

As a result, there is a growing disparity of learning standards across organisations, and it is more important than ever to consider the unique needs of the business. Does learning still align to overall business goals, which will have no doubt changed since the beginning of the pandemic? Can learning still happen in the flow of work when that flow has been so disrupted?

If your organisation has changed, your learning needs will have changed too.






Understanding fatigue vs digital fatigue

Digital fatigue is certainly something for learning organisations to be aware of, but it is not the only factor at play here. According to recent research, [more than half](#) of employees feel burnt out due to the circumstances of the past 18 months. The working day is often much longer now, fuelling a more intensive workforce.

Some areas of homeworking are not yet balanced, which creates an added stressor. In an office environment, no one would be expected to sit in the same room for seven plus hours at a time, or attend meeting after meeting with no time allowed for comfort breaks.

Learning professionals must be empathetic to these other challenges and find improvements. One tactic we've found useful, for example, is the '45-minute hour'. This involves scheduling a meeting for one hour but sticking strictly to 45 minutes, allowing participants downtime to take a break, reflect or prepare for their next task. Obviously if you can keep the meeting to 30 minutes all the better, but the same logic applies about creating space in between commitments.

However, it's important for learning to find a way to facilitate downtime without it feeling wasteful or gimmicky. Time spent away from the screen – away from work – should still feel purposeful.



A smiling man in a blue denim shirt is pointing at a laptop screen. The background is a blurred office setting. The text is overlaid on the image.

Balancing blended resources

Pre-pandemic, learning via video, online resources or virtual sessions, for example, may have been more engaging simply because an employee's day wouldn't have revolved around one sole screen. Now that the majority of the day is spent looking at our computers/devices, learning must be sure to provide multi-modal learning, with relevant, engaging and succinct content.

This is not entirely new. A blended mix of learning resources has always been the best way to engage learners. However, certain assets, such as audio only learning, are now becoming more important because they can offer time away from a screen.

Audio only can also help people to learn within the flow of work (or otherwise) more easily. As working days become more intense, learning must continue to happen as part of that working day. Nano learning has also become increasingly important in supporting learners in the moment.

And finding ways to connect human beings in an engaging, rewarding way is more important than ever. There's a certain loneliness about working from home with your colleagues spread across the country or even the globe.

Where once AI, VR, and AR technology solutions were seen as the great hope of scaling learning solutions, we're now faced with a challenge of 're-humanising' the learning experience in a virtual world. These technologies still have their place but tools like virtual cohorting, live virtual coaching, and real-time feedback tools are increasingly important.

Not a burden **but a blessing**

Learning teams must understand that without careful positioning, another ask of their time can feel like a burden instead of an opportunity. Employees who are taking on more work over longer periods can even feel resentful of learning if it is made to feel as though this is an extra task for them to accomplish in an already packed schedule.

L&D should re-examine existing models to discover if and how they can apply to the new environment. Hemsley Fraser's excite, engage, embed model, for example, has been the basis of many successful learning programmes. But, in 2021, the excite phase needed to adapt to meet the changing circumstances of learners.

We reframed what we mean by excite as a result, encouraging a bigger focus on the 'why' and the relevancy. This has happened alongside a shift from role-based to skill-based learning. If participants understand why they are being asked to take part in learning, and how it will benefit them, they will be excited for the learning to begin.

Learning is absolutely crucial for modern organisations to adapt to and be ready for changing business environments, but it must clearly demonstrate value to learners and positively help drive organisational goals. **If participants suffer from digital fatigue while learning they will become disengaged, both from the current learning and future programs.**

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