HOW COVID-19 CHANGED THE FUTURE OF TRAINING

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SUMMARY: Training employees is essential for all employers. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, training was provided using various methods, primarily face-to-face and online. The pandemic changed the way employers think and act when it comes to training and required most employers to make immediate and significant changes in their training methodology. This article discusses areas of changes in employer training due to the pandemic, including virtual reality training, virtual onboarding, reimbursement agreements, and virtual mentoring. The artifacts utilized in this study are scholarly articles and employer reports.

Keywords: training, virtual learning, pandemic, onboarding, reboarding, mentoring, outskilling, COVID-19, training budgets

Introduction

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way training is executed in the long term. In recent years, employers have adapted their training methods to stay competitive and retain employees. Training employees has always been an essential part of all organizations. Prior to the pandemic, training was primarily provided by face-to-face training sessions and online sessions (Power et al., 2020). Due to the pandemic, employers are finding that asynchronous and synchronous training sessions can be effective methods (Power et al., 2020). A major impact of the pandemic was the start of the remote-work revolution. However, new employees working remotely need adequate orientation to feel valued by their new organization. Onboarding, a critical stage of orientation training, was significantly changed by the pandemic, although the primary objectives remain the same (Maurer, 2022). Nearly half (47.7%) of new employees hired during the pandemic were onboarded remotely, compared to only 11.6% before the pandemic (Roy, 2022). The pandemic has also caused a second onboarding issue for employers: planning the return to office work by remote workers, or "reboarding" (Maurer, 2022). This article examines the new training strategies that have been successfully employed to ensure that training is effective and efficient.

Background

This article shares components of training that illustrate changes employers made during and post pandemic. Implications and recommendations for organizations to introduce effective

virtual training post pandemic to maintain a competitive advantage are also presented. The authors' statements, opinions, advice, and recommendations are provided based on supported academic documentation, which add to the body of knowledge based on effective training procedures.

Changes in Training Models During the Pandemic

During the pandemic, employers were forced to quickly adapt their methods of onboarding and training to meet employee needs. Many organizations quickly adapted their training methods as employers needed to become resourceful to keep and maintain their competitive advantage within their industries. Employer changes in training methods due to COVID-19 primarily included those listed in Figure 1. A McKinsey survey of human resource (HR) executives found that the pandemic made it necessary to spend more time on workforce onboarding and training than on recruiting (Harbert, 2020). Specifically, employers reported that they:

- Focused on improving their ability to quickly train new hires, cross-train current employees, and redeploy them to manage labor shortages;
- Reimagined how they recruit and retain employees who work from home; and
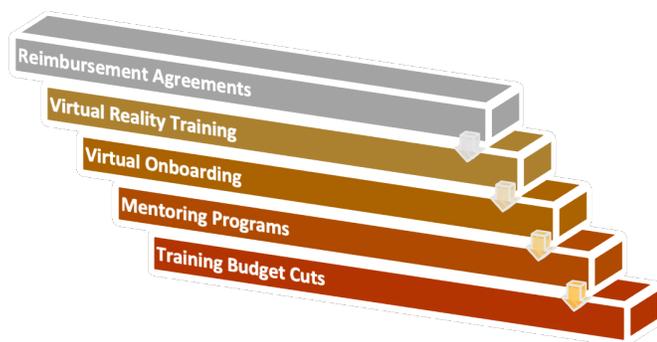- Emphasized their benefits to employees to attract new hires and increase retention.

Figure 1. Employer changes in training programs due to COVID-19 (Neal, 2022)

Reimbursement Agreements

Some employers were forced to invest more resources in training programs as one method of attracting employees during the pandemic-caused labor shortages. Due to the greater expense of these new programs, some employers implemented a new strategy: requiring new hires to sign a reimbursement agreement (RA) to recoup expenses if the employee quit in the near future. However, such agreements may or may not be enforceable if challenged by an employee. According to Neal (2022), courts are more likely to find these agreements enforceable if:

- The training is portable and, thus, could be useful to a new employer (e.g., professional

certifications and equipment and technology applications);

- The employee is provided a copy of the agreement before the training starts;
- The agreement specifies the cost of the training program and the length of time the employee must work for the employer under the agreement; and
- A signed copy of the agreement is obtained voluntarily by the employer to prove the employee was aware of the agreement.

Onboarding and Changes During the Pandemic

Onboarding is an essential part of employee retention. Employers realized that, to remain competitive and retain employees, they needed to change and adapt quickly. For example, the UNC Greensboro University Libraries Technical Services Department reported the successful virtual onboarding in a library accustomed to in-person hiring and onboarding. The library developed a structured virtual onboarding program and successfully dealt with the social challenges posed by physical distancing in a new working environment (Craft et al., 2021).

In another example, the state of California in 2020 mandated a shelter-in-place order in response to COVID-19. As a result, nursing professional development practitioners created a new virtual onboarding and training strategy. The strategy included the development of a new onboarding webpage and a new intranet onboarding webpage. The goal was to train new hires in previously established core competencies. New hires were required to rotate through individual workstations in the intranet to receive content and then be evaluated. They also had to demonstrate competence in all core competencies before continuing it their orientation. Total onboarding and orientation hours decreased by 83%, and new hires received more individually tailored training. The new virtual learning onboarding program enabled many new staff to be onboarded and trained more efficiently and focused on demonstrating the learning of core competencies (Noza Margallo et al., 2021).

Effectively Using Mentoring Programs During the Pandemic

During the pandemic, employers saw an increase in severe psychological challenges among employees due to employee isolation. The challenges ranged from a lack of communication and loneliness to severe burnout and depression. In some cases, this caused a decrease in production. Many employers found that virtual mentoring offered a successful solution to combat the isolation issues. They countered the challenges of remote working environments with the use of e-mentoring, which utilizes digital platforms or telecommunications to provide employees and students with support (Kaufman et al., 2022). E-mentoring assists in providing a caring connection, transferring knowledge, and providing the necessary support for employees and students (Kaufman et al., 2022).

Training Post Pandemic: Long-Term Changes

In 2021, the 40th annual comprehensive survey of U.S. employers' training focused on the effects of COVID-19 on training. The survey produced interesting findings with regard to COVID-19. About half of all employers reported cuts in their training budgets, and 76% of those employers cited COVID-19 as the cause of training budget cuts. An impressive 66% of employers reported COVID-19-related budget cuts at some level, as shown in Table 1 (Issue Information, 2021).

Table 1: U.S. Employers Reporting Training Budget Cuts or Holds in 2021 Due to COVID-19 (Issues Information, 2021)

Percent of Total Budget Cut/Hold	Percent of Employers Reporting Cuts
1%–10%	25%
11%–25%	23%
26%–50%	6%
51%–75%	13%
Total	67% of all employers
No change in 2021 training budget	33% of all employers

The 2021 employer survey on training budgets also asked employers about the types of training challenges experienced during the pandemic, which included keeping remote employees engaged, a lack of budget resources to develop virtual training, and technology to enable remote training (Issue Information, 2021). In addition, respondents predicted the methods of post- pandemic training they will employ, with 89% expecting to utilize either classroom training while maintaining successful remote training or primarily remote training. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic will likely change the future of employer training methods to include some of the following remote training methods developed in response to the pandemic:
- return to classroom while maintaining some remote training programs (56%);
- primarily remote training (33%); and
- only classroom (8%) (Issue Information, 2021).

Post-COVID Virtual Learning Keys

A survey by LinkedIn reported that 74% of employers globally believe that building employee skills is the most critical HR challenge for the post-pandemic era. Employers' first response in providing training during the pandemic was to move from in-person to virtual formats. However, to be effective, they found virtual learning needed to be limited to about 90 minutes and include no more than 20 to 30 people at a time or people would tune out (Gurchiek,2020).

Thus, a key to successful virtual learning is using limited sessions with small groups. Shorter employee attention spans in virtual learning environments require careful planning. Training experts have suggested two virtual learning practices that can lead to a successful

transition from in-person to virtual training (Zielinski, 2020). First, training facilitators should break a body of content into parts spread out over time, so learners spend only a few hours a week over several weeks on training. Second, between component parts, self-paced tools such as quizzes, discussion boards, and bulletin boards should reinforce content. Third, facilitators should stay engaged with participants through the extended virtual learning program.

Virtual Onboarding Practices

When organizations transitioned to remote work during the pandemic, virtual onboarding became necessary. These new virtual onboarding programs were even more important for retaining employees than pre-pandemic programs because new hires met few, if any, people during the recruiting and hiring process. The new virtual onboarding programs require greater structure. For example, Kelly Chuck of LinkedIn suggested that an employer's pre-pandemic one-day onboarding program be expanded to a full week of virtual programs, with short sessions spread over the week. The program also included breakout sessions to enable the new hire to build relationships (Mauer, 2020)

According to Mauer (2020), successful virtual onboarding programs generally include:

- Multiple and interactive video sessions with quizzes;
- Virtual meetings with managers, team members, and executives;
- Full days of virtual sessions with various presenters;
- The ability of new hires to complete paperwork remotely;
- Onboarding buddies or mentors;
- The provision of technology, including pre-loaded applications and instruction videos.
- Welcome baskets and branded items (e.g., clothing and mugs) sent to employees' homes; and
- Feedback from new hires after the initial onboarding and in the following months because new employees' initial excitement decreases quickly.

The Rochester Regional Health organization had to onboard all non-clerical staff and administrative staff remotely using telework during the COVID-19 quarantine. The new onboarding and training process included the goals of learning new tasks, effectively maintaining business operations, and preventing employees' feelings of isolation. The new onboarding program included eight actionable items: creating a virtual workday, planning for purposeful learning, developing spreadsheets for process flow, engaging other staff for mini-tutorials, scheduling remote meet and greets, assigning supplemental self-learning modules, establishing standard virtual meeting formats, and conducting regular one-to-one check-ins. The Medical Education Office reported success in all eight items in the new, remote onboarding and training of new hires (Goodermote, 2020).

Mentoring Future Leaders in the Post-pandemic Era

Virtual mentoring has been shown to be an effective tool during the pandemic. The HR Research Institute (2022) and the Art of Mentoring conducted a study on how mentoring has changed since the pandemic and the effectiveness of virtual mentoring. The study found that,

during the pandemic, 64% of surveyed employees were mentored, either virtually or in person; in addition, 86% of program managers used virtual mentoring programs while 19% used mentor program administration software.

Creating a successful mentorship program requires support across the entire organization and having leaders who are willing and able to support and engage with the mentee (Groves, 2021). Mentoring may provide the benefits such as eliminating barriers, providing direction, and offering a support system for upcoming opportunities (Groves, 2021).

Virtual Reality Training

In-person training was not an option for many employers during the pandemic, and some may have assumed that online training was the only alternative. A study by PwC indicated virtual reality (VR) training can be just as effective and productive as in-person (classroom) online training for many soft skills, including diversity awareness, harassment, equity, and inclusion (Roepe, 2020). PwC used VR to train 1,600 new managers on leadership skills and produced impressive results:

- The VR training was 52% more effective than in-person (classroom) training.
- The VR training was four times faster than in-person (classroom) training.
- VR learners were 275% more confident in their ability to apply the skills learned.
- VR learners were 375% more confident and emotionally connected than in-person (classroom) learners.
- While the VR training required a greater initial investment in headsets and other technology than in-person (classroom) or online training, with approximately 375 learners, the total cost of VR training was equal to that of in-person (classroom) or online training.

Thus, VR should be considered a realistic alternative to in-person (classroom) and online training of soft skills in the post-pandemic era (Likens & Eckert, 2020).

Post-Pandemic Training

In the post-pandemic era, it is likely that the shift away from classroom training to virtual reality will continue and even expand for several reasons (Zielinski, 2021). Remote work for a substantial number of employees will likely continue. In addition, organizations are rethinking whether they really need to bring people together for in-person classroom orientation or training. The new virtual reality training approach allows people to visualize together either in the same room or remotely. Finally, virtual reality training has proven to be successful and cost-effective, especially for soft skills training.

Recommendations for Employers

This article has demonstrated that training can effectively take place in a blended environment. The analysis leads to three recommendations. First, employers should consider utilizing virtual onboarding practices. Employers are encouraged to conduct research within

their organization to determine which virtual strategies or methods will be most effective and practical. Second, in an online environment, a trainer can provide training using both asynchronous and synchronous methods. Providing trainees with the choice of when to take the training reduces their stress and more effectively transfers knowledge. Utilizing discussion boards and optional telecommunication tools will assist in online training. Third, train mentors to be supportive and share their knowledge with employees. E-mentoring programs may build relationships within the company and increase employee job satisfaction and retention.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has changed training for the long term. Employers needed to quickly adapt in order to offer effective virtual onboarding and training in place of traditional classroom training. If employers do not adapt, they may lose valuable employees and their competitive advantage while creating employee retention and recruitment issues. The new training methods developed during the pandemic are likely to help employers meet the related challenges of the post-pandemic era. A lesson every employer learned during the pandemic was that the need to change and adapt training programs quickly is essential. Those employers that successfully adapted their training methods are overcoming the challenges of the pandemic by utilizing new strategies and modifying old strategies.

The authors in this study focused on employer changes in training methods due to the COVID- 19 pandemic. In the future, researchers should determine the long-term changes in employer training methods due to the successful development and implementation of virtual methods started during the pandemic. Finally, this study utilized surveys published in credible journals; a quantitative study could be performed to assess how the new virtual training methods compare to traditional classroom training in terms of efficiency and effectiveness.

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