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Creating impactful and inclusive learning

Enabling flexible, accessible learning that improves a learner's existing practice

Digitise content to enable anytime and anyplace learning

A relatively inexpensive way to make learning more flexible is to digitise content. For example, a Scottish leisure operator's L&D team used screencasting software to record videos showing how to use its new cashless booking system. This enabled client-facing staff, who work different shifts, to access learning anytime – and as often as they needed – without having to wait for in-person training. Staff said they also found the videos easier to follow than printed guides with screenshots.

For My Leadership Strengths, a leadership development consultancy in the north of England, going digital has radically transformed its business model and expanded its client base. Before COVID-19, its clients (organisation leaders) would ask their colleagues to complete feedback online and then have one-to-one coaching sessions in person to reflect on the feedback. The sessions were run by accredited coaches using a physical toolkit of development cards.

When in-person coaching sessions had to stop during lockdown, it spurred the consultancy on to introduce a digital self-assessment coaching tool. The tool enables a more consistent user experience and clients can now choose to be coached either online or in person. It enables the consultancy to offer its services to more leaders than ever before, including in new sectors. The consultancy's co-founder Andy Jenkins said going online had not cannibalised the accredited coaches' market because there is room for both methods of learning.

The consultancy continues to refine its platform based on feedback from customers and paid user testers. *'Don't be afraid to develop something that's just good enough to start with and get feedback. It's OK to get from A to B, even though you think you can get from A to Z,'* said Jenkins.

Think differently about how to achieve blended learning objectives

If an essential element in delivering impactful learning is to create step-change, in other words, significantly improve a learner's existing practice, digitising training alone will not be enough. Learning also needs to be accessible, collaborative and tailored to the learner's needs.

Switching its in-person two-hour lectures onto shorter online Zoom sessions during the pandemic marked the start of one business school's journey towards blended learning. *'Sage on the stage has gone... we realised early on that we needed to change our approach. We as a [business] school decided that all intended learning outcomes should be achieved asynchronously,'* said Sarah Robinson, an Academic CIPD Member and professor at the Adam Smith Business School at the University of Glasgow.

Robinson and her colleagues worked through the summer of 2020 to record bite-sized lecture videos for the new academic year. It was a steep learning curve, but they managed to produce the first iteration of a blended learning programme in a few months, when previously it might have taken years. Fortunately, other staff members who had produced blended learning programmes were on hand to share their advice with colleagues. More recently, the school hired learning technologists to help refine its courses.

Robinson said that ensuring your platform is accessible is about more than simply adding captions to videos. *'It's how you speak, how you explain things and what students can access. We can't always use YouTube materials because it's not accessible all over the world.'*

The list goes on. In essence, digital accessibility is about making sure that the learning solution is easy to use and has no frustrating barriers. Robinson's live online classes are now more student-led with Q&As and group discussions. And as most laptops now feature webcams, she is able to invite a more diverse range of people professionals to speak on video in class. The online learning platform, which wasn't used before the pandemic, is now alive with discussions. For example, Robinson posts journal articles and then asks students to choose one to read and share their reflections on the forum.

Robinson said that the new approach doesn't save her time, but believes it delivers a more accessible, tailored student experience and encourages them to be independent learners. *'There is still plenty of refinement to be done, such as standardising the look and feel across programmes. I think this will take several years,'* she said.

Help people discover the benefits of going online

Even the most well-designed digital learning solutions won't improve a learner's existing

practice if they choose not to use it or can't access the internet.

In Wales in 2019–20, 10% of the population are not online while 27% lack the five essential digital skills, such as being able to complete a form online. This is problematic for public service organisations because people who don't have the skills to access their services – like the elderly, disabled and job seekers – are probably those who need help the most.

Digital Communities Wales: Digital Confidence, Health and Well-being (DCW) is a programme funded by the Welsh Government to tackle digital exclusion. Delivered by the Wales Co-operative Centre, DCW supports organisations in Wales to embed digital inclusion into their strategies and practices, and coordinates volunteering initiatives to improve people's essential digital skills.

DCW trains public-facing staff, such as care workers and job centre advisers, to help others feel more confident about going online – for example, to help people book virtual GP appointments or make video calls to family and friends. It has also loaned tablets to care homes during the pandemic and partnered with organisations that supply equipment to reduce the financial barriers of going online.

Choosing the right people to act as **digital skills champions** can improve the lives of many others. It helps if the champion is trusted and liked by the people they help, but they don't necessarily need to be tech savvy. One man DCW trained to be a champion didn't own a smartphone but was well liked and respected by his colleagues. Although it took longer to train him, it was worthwhile because he got a smartphone soon after and now uses it to book holidays and swap shifts on the organisation's new HR information system, while also supporting others.

Another tip is to be creative with how you match champions with learners. One of DCW's initiatives was to train schoolchildren to become digital volunteers, visiting the elderly in care homes. Laura Phillips, DCW's training and development manager, recounted how a schoolchild significantly improved the last years of a man's life by getting to know him first before talking about digital skills. The man was initially on a high dose of sedatives because he was sometimes aggressive with care home staff.

'The boy talked to him like a grandpa about non-health stuff and discovered that the gentleman really loved rollercoasters... The care home made the decision to put a video of a roller coaster on a VR headset [for the man to watch]. Immediately he was brighter, more engaging... They were able to get an iPad out, show him pictures online and talk about basic digital skills. Because of that, they were able to reduce the amount of medication he was on... There's no medical evidence behind it – simply the [huge] impact on one human being. And it made the staff's lives easier.'

James Williams, a DCW digital inclusion trainer, said: *'The number one reason that people don't feel like they are digitally skilled is lack of confidence. Give people the time to develop their basic digital skills for that continuing professional development [with learning resources from] [The Good Things Foundation](#) and other organisations that offer training. Digital is not going away. It's important that we take the time to invest in our people now, rather than when it's too late.'*

Find out how you can put together a professional development plan and change the way you nurture and retain top talent with CIPD partner Personio's resource: ['How can an actionable professional development plan help employees?'](#)

Our digital transformation series continues next month with insights on using learning experience platforms to identify career pathways and integrating learning analytics to build a talent marketplace.