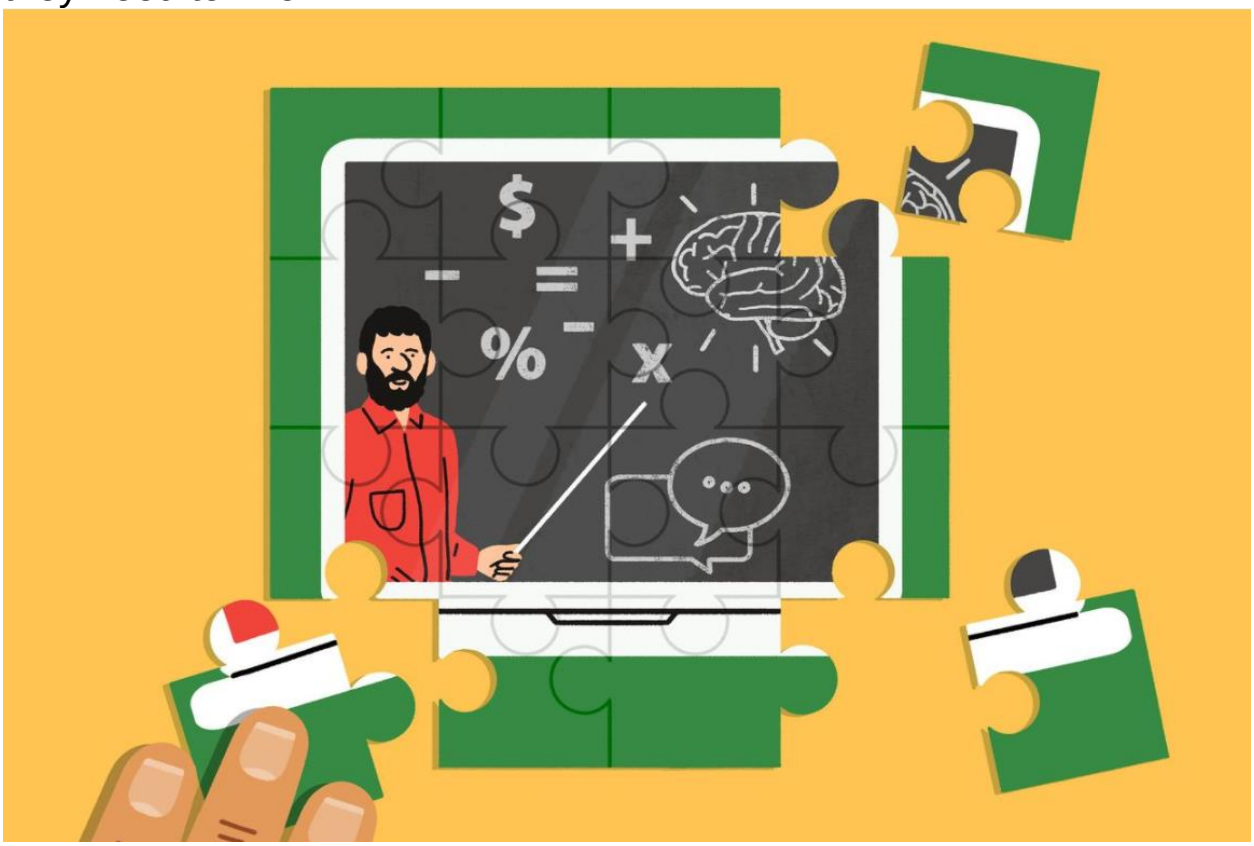
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

How the Covid-19 Pandemic Changed Employee Training

Say goodbye to the classroom. Companies are now figuring out how to best use technology to make sure workers learn—and retain—what they need to know.



Companies are breaking up long lectures into shorter programs so employees don't tune out.
ILLUSTRATION: MICHAEL PARKIN

By Suman Bhattacharyya
Updated Nov. 27, 2021 11:00 am ET

There are some fundamental changes under way in how companies train their workers.

Out are the long, boring, in-person classes that companies have used for decades to get employees up to speed on every aspect of their jobs. Instead, bosses are tapping technologies that deliver training whether employees are at the office or at home. And they are using new ways of packaging that training, making it more palatable and useful to workers who often got bored or distracted with sitting in a classroom or watching endless videos.

This shift was already under way before Covid-19, but the pandemic moved things along significantly, says Katy Tynan, a principal analyst at Forrester Research.
"Prior to the pandemic, there was an overemphasis on formal learning as a delivery mechanism," she says. Formal, classroom-delivered training was easy to plan and deliver, but organizations didn't always see the intended results, she adds.

"Organizations are starting to pursue learning in new forms, and certainly at a new pace, where it's much more frequent learning opportunities," says Tracey Malcolm, global future of work leader at the consulting firm Willis Towers Watson. "The formal training itself is certainly bite-sized, so that it can be consumed more quickly, [and] the pace of learning is increased."
Here are some of the key lessons corporate leaders have learned when it comes to training effectively.

Break the training into small chunks.

The typical training routine is to send employees to a full day (or full week) of lessons. Get it all over with in one massive burst of teaching.

But that doesn't really work. As pretty much anybody who has sat through such training can tell you, people lose attention with training very quickly—and start tuning out.

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“On average, people’s concentration in virtual [training] lapses about every seven minutes unless there’s a change in the method or mode of delivery,” says Sally Earnshaw, managing director of culture change consulting at Gallagher, a consulting firm.

One answer, she says, is to change up the methods of teaching often, “moving every seven minutes from slide to breakout [group] to media to polling.”

Even more basic, simply break up long lectures into shorter programs on a single topic.

“If you’ve got an hourlong program, you make it three 20-minute minute chunks, and you present them at different times so that people aren’t trying to learn them all at once,” Ms. Tynan says.

Tim Murphy, chief administrative officer at Mastercard, says the company has created on-demand training across topics ranging from handling basic tasks in Microsoft Word to programming in different languages. Executives break down complex topics—such as banking technology—into short, accessible lessons that can be as short as seven minutes, depending on the topic, according to a company spokesperson.
Katrina Baker, digital learning manager at Adobe, says the company has seen strong results from its similar bite-size training methods.

“I think it became particularly clear as Covid hit and folks were at home that there are a lot of distractions,” she says.

Ms. Baker says Adobe has seen a 20% to 30% increase in engagement—such as how many minutes of video content employees have watched—from the first to second quarter of 2021.

Train more often.

When it comes to training, one and done is easy. But it’s ineffective. Employees need to practice and maintain the momentum of continuing training to ensure that the new skills will be applied to the job.

“You need to have regular reinforcement of what you’ve been learning,” says Wayne Cascio, a professor of management at the University of Colorado Denver’s Business School.

“You use it or lose it,” Mr. Cascio adds, “and simply doing it one-off or learning a skill one time, and then not being able to practice and use it on the job, is a recipe for skill decay.”

Immersive Labs, a U.K.-based company that offers cybersecurity training to large companies across the world, uses frequent short exercises to ensure skills don’t atrophy after training.

In traditional cybersecurity training exercises, users might gather in a room for a day, or sometimes more. With these exercises, they manage a fictional crisis online—modeled on real-world events like this year’s Colonial Pipeline hacking attack—in 30 to 40 minutes, from wherever they are, running the emergency scenarios through their browser. Other exercises use games to teach more specific skills, like cloud security.

“They could be having a cup of coffee at home, or on the train on the way into work,” says Anthony D’Alton, senior director of external affairs at Immersive Labs.

Passive listening isn’t enough.

Learners can’t be expected to pay attention to an online lesson if all you’re doing is replicating a classroom situation. Course participants need to participate in a range of activities beyond passively listening.

One effective strategy is minigames, says Sylvester Arnab, a professor of game science at Coventry University’s Disruptive Media Learning Lab.

That might mean a simple quiz game, where employees try to answer questions about what they know. Or it can be a game that puts employees into a work-related scenario and asks them to make decisions to move along the story—think of a choose-your-own-adventure game.

For instance, they might have to deal with conflict between two employees during a team meeting.

Managers then get a choice: They can side with one of the employees; assert authority and stop the argument; or arbitrate the situation. The story will develop differently depending on what they choose.

Have workers learn from each other.

Passive, classroom lessons have another problem: The trainers may not understand what employees need to know, and deliver lessons that are too abstract.

One solution to the problem: Let co-workers train each other.

In many organizations, peer-to-peer training works better "because employees are living in that context," Ms. Malcolm says.

For example, regional sales teams might have top sellers coach other salespeople through biweekly team meetings, and then host larger learning events quarterly.

Linda Argote, professor of organizational behavior and theory at Carnegie Mellon University's Tepper School of Business, says that training team members together also enables them to "learn who knows what and who is good at what." That helps them assign tasks to the more qualified colleague, as well as know whom to consult for advice.

One size doesn't fit all.

One-size-fits-all training often isn't enough to grab employee attention. So, organizations are turning to artificial intelligence to analyze workers' skills and career plans—then serve up a selection of training and assignments that suits them best.

Mastercard has a new system called Unlocked that taps AI to match people with training courses, project work and volunteer opportunities. If a user says he wants to learn more about "financial inclusion," for example, the system might suggest a learning opportunity or project tied to that topic.

If a user says she wants to work toward becoming a senior software engineer, Unlocked would show what skills she currently has—and which ones are missing—to get that role, and would then recommend opportunities to help close the skills gap.

The results so far have been positive, says Mr. Murphy. More than 3,100 employees currently use Unlocked, and the company plans to expand it next year.

“We’ll use it as the AI develops and learns more about you to help people plot out career trajectories and next possible roles,” says Mr. Murphy.