Learning & development for WFH staff

Matthew Kay investigates the pros & cons of training home-based workers

The UK Government may have decided in February to end COVID rules early, but it's unlikely we'll see everyone rushing back to work in the office five days a week. All signs point to hybrid working being here to stay, and a huge number of British individuals will still be logging on from home at least two days per week.

Recent research from Gartner (https://gtnr.it/3OlCyL0) for example found that 74% of remote employees who were not working remotely pre-COVID will remain in a remote role post-COVID for the foreseeable future.

With many law firms allowing staff to work from home part-time, training and development opportunities provided to staff might suffer. Many firms were understandably used to a conference room setting, or bringing external speakers into their offices to deliver seminars and presentations. It can be difficult to replicate that virtually while keeping the quality consistent.

Why they can't be run the same way

There are many reasons why training must be run differently for staff working from home compared to in the office. For example, staff *aren't* sitting in a physical conference room—they are given no means of breaking the ice with one another before the first session has begun.

Let's imagine that a training session is being run in the London office of a huge global law firm, with hundreds of employees. The session involves delegates from entirely different teams and even departments. There are anywhere from 20 to 50 individuals in a room together, and most are strangers to one another.

As they wait for the external speaker to arrive, they have the opportunity to chat and get to know one another. This is particularly important in instances where that same cohort of individuals will be reconvening over multiple sessions, over multiple weeks (which is common). When everybody knows each other and feels comfortable asking questions and sharing ideas, their engagement with the training programme is likely to increase tenfold.

On the other hand, let's imagine that same global law firm tries to move this same training session to a virtual setting, making no adjustments to the programme to compensate. You'll have between 20 and 50 delegates sitting, isolated, on their own, staring at a blank screen waiting for the session to begin. They have no opportunity to communicate with each other, and are instead thrown straight into the training. Delegates may subsequently worry about 'asking a silly question' in front of a virtual room full of strangers. That's good for nobody—least of all the training organiser. They are left to fight an uphill battle engaging people.

How can this problem be solved?

The key solution to the problem here lies in 'thoughtfulness'. The programme organiser needs to recognise the importance of the out-of-session casual chit-chat that can really help delegates bond with one another and feel at ease. That's the first step.

Another simple solution is building in time at the start of your session for everybody to introduce themselves. This may not always be practical, particularly in much larger groups , but in many instances it can work to make people on the session feel more familiar with one another. There is a function on apps like Teams or Zoom that allows the organiser to place people into separate rooms. For larger groups, the cohort could be split into working groups at the start of the session and moved into a 'private room' to make introductions and discuss the upcoming session. The same working groups could then be used for any group work later down the line.

Firms could also make better use of technology eg looking at 'smart tools' they can integrate into training programmes. We've done this ourselves through 'Vario Advance', an online training portal for our freelancers, and we've had great success. We felt it was important to create a community of professionals that could stay in touch even outside of fixed sessions. These kinds of online portals help employees continue to learn whenever they want and provide 24/7 access to resources, which can be really valuable for busy professionals.

Firms also need to be aware that if a person is naturally quiet, they may not speak up. This is more obvious in the real world—a person may open their mouth to say something before being talked over by another delegate. In a physical setting, an experienced trainer can spot these cues and intervene to encourage the person to speak up. In a virtual setting, this is almost impossible. Whoever is managing the session needs to be thoughtful, perhaps by building in regular intervals for people to ask questions, or making a note of those that have not spoken across a session.

Summary

The most important thing for any law firm to remember is that a training programme cannot be shoe-horned into a virtual setting without considering the aspects of it that do or don't work on a video call. Too often, this is not considered, and businesses try to run the session as they always have done.

Firms need to make it a regular part of the process when organising training and development to sit down and ask themselves 'what will we lose by moving a session online?' If there's even a moment's hesitation on this question, chances are, something needs to change. It's the only way a law firm will give its staff the learning and development opportunities they deserve. **NLJ**

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