



# What We Have Learned

How Working Voices will drive the Hybrid model in Learning & Development

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## Introduction

Whatever happens next, the way people work – and thus the way they train and learn – will be significantly different from what they did before. But what will the hybrid learning model actually look like?

We've all learnt a great deal since the pandemic-enforced changes of early 2020, and in the following pages we'll outline some of Working Voices' key findings from the most challenging period in our 25-year history.

Until last year, we'd delivered the vast majority of our training face-to-face. We'd already been discussing how to develop our online offering, but there was scepticism in the team about whether

virtual training could ever be as good as working with people in the room. And we know that some of our clients shared that scepticism.

What did we learn? That in the right circumstances online training can be **just as effective as face-to-face training**. It's a matter of shedding assumptions, and making key adjustments: to **group size, session duration** and ways of **engaging, informing and transforming** our course attendees.

It's also important to identify the **key advantages** of both online and face-to-face learning, and how we can combine the best of both in a hybrid model. Encouragingly, we've found that our **small-group, coaching-based approach** – which works so well in the room – can be transferred successfully to the online environment. And that larger-group online sessions can work brilliantly too – so long as they're **interactive and conversation-based**.

Above all, we need to be aware of the **strengths and limitations** of different styles of delivery: to be **realistic** about what certain sorts of training can achieve, while working for the best possible outcome for the participants.

Hybrid learning will inevitably involve a **blended approach**, and in the following pages we'll set out our thoughts on how to run highly useful, informative and genuinely **transformative training**, both online and in person.

## Four Key Questions

There are four important questions to consider when thinking about what makes online training work and how to deliver it successfully in the hybrid learning environment:

1. **How long should training sessions be?**
2. **Can large group sessions really work?**
3. **What kind of learning environment do we need to create?**
4. **Are we aiming to instruct people, or change their behaviour?**

### How long should a session run?

People have spent their working lives in front of screens for years. The conventional, pre-pandemic office provided lots of opportunities for 'cognitive breaks': incidental conversations, face-to-face meetings, and of course, in-person training sessions. Since 2020, most (if not all) those activities have had to be screen-based too. And that will continue in the new, hybrid environment.

As a result, the phenomenon dubbed 'Zoom Fatigue' is receiving serious scholarly [attention](#). This [article](#) gives four of the possible causes with particular attention to the effects of video:

- The exhausting feeling of **being close-up** and nose-to-nose with other participants
- **Non-verbal communication becomes effortful online**, but in real life it's effortless
- It's like **looking in the mirror all day**, which for many leads to self-consciousness and self-criticism
- **Reduced mobility** due to the need to stay in view of the camera and to appear attentive

While many workers are keen to work from home a good deal of the time, few are keen to use *all* that time videoconferencing. Being on videoconferencing calls is inherently depleting. In contrast, face-to-face interaction has the potential to replenish. If the pandemic has taught us anything it's that we all – even the introverts – rely on social contact for energy.

But much as we'd like to get back to face-to-face learning, we need to be pragmatic, and to explore ways of keeping people engaged, even if they must train at a distance from one another.

Running **shorter sessions** – allowing plenty of times for breaks – seems to be key. Our pre-pandemic face-to-face sessions regularly ran for between three and four hours (sometimes longer). We quickly realised that wouldn't work online: as a result, our training courses tend to last for between 1 to 2 hours (with some running to 3 hours if required).

**KEY FINDING:** We need to be realistic about attention spans and fatigue, and run shorter, more dynamic training sessions online.

### Can large group sessions really work?

In response to our clients' needs, and the challenges presented by the pandemic, we've often run shorter sessions. We've also delivered them to **larger** groups of people (50 or more, and on occasion up to 200).

Face-to-face sessions have always been limited by room size and participant availability. Virtual training, by contrast, can be delivered to an unlimited number of participants in numerous different locations. As a course attendee, you lose the intimacy of a smaller group session, but you gain the chance to learn with a truly diverse group and hear perspectives on common challenges from around the world.

We've responded to the large-group challenge by making our sessions as **interactive and discussion-based** as possible. Our participants are encouraged to join in throughout, either via the chat function (which is great for shyer attendees) or by talking to us. We run a mixture of **whole-group and individual masterclass exercises, blended with instruction and feedback**. And for larger groups, we always use two trainers: a **main presenter and a producer**, who ensures that the participants can feed into the conversation whenever they want to.

**KEY FINDING:** Large group sessions can work, so long as they're interactive, conversation-based and energised.

### What kind of learning environment do we need to create?

But we have to be realistic about how much a two-hour, large-group online course can achieve on its own, and think about ways of **encouraging and embedding behaviour change** despite the limitations of the medium.

We always aim to blend **engagement with entertainment** in our courses. The two don't necessarily go together, but both are essential to an effective learning experience.

What does the science say? Emotions and levels of participation have a huge influence over levels of learning. Positive emotions such as enjoyment, hope and pride are positively associated with motivation, effort, self-regulation, and adoption of sophisticated learning strategies (Pekrun et al. 2011). But if we focus too much on what the participants (and we as trainers ) enjoy most, there's a danger that people have a positive experience on the course, but may well make no meaningful changes to the way they work.

And the science indicates that challenge and – to some degree – frustration both improve metacognition (the ability to understand and organise our own learning process) {Artino 2009}. People need to experience a level of frustration or impediment to stimulate higher-level, strategic thinking.

As trainers, we aim to create a sense of challenge without jeopardising psychological safety. Obviously, that's easier face-to-face where we can build group trust and rapport, read the room in general and pick up on the discomfort of one individual who needs us to 'pull back'. It's much more difficult online to make these intuitive judgements, and we can't rely on participants to voice their levels of engagement or happiness.

But it's considerably easier to create a genuinely challenging, engaging online learning environment with **smaller groups** and a **series** of shorter sessions, blended with **1:1 coaching**, as we'll describe below.

**We need to both entertain and engage when training online – and some degree of challenge and frustration is essential to any learning process.**

### **Are we aiming to instruct people, or to help them change their behaviour?**

Imagine you went to driving lessons in a classroom or online, with the instructor spending every lesson explaining how to drive. It wouldn't matter how much you remembered about what they said – in the end you still wouldn't be able to drive. Someone who'd spent just one hour behind the wheel with an instructor giving feedback, would be more advanced.

That's because **knowing more things doesn't necessarily help us to do things differently** or better. When we apply this principle to professional development, the equivalent to being behind the wheel next to an instructor is [practical work with feedback](#). To the extent that online training allows us to practise and receive feedback, it can drive behaviour change.

That's why Working Voices trainers are always looking for opportunities to **maximise practical activities in online sessions**.

This principle also relates to session-length. It's **challenging to fit these 3 essential stages** into a single online training session:

1. Rapport-building and ice-breaking
2. Presentation and discussion of content, information, and advice
3. Practise with feedback

Experience has taught us that missing out stage 1 is not an option: **engagement** is harder to create throughout if the facilitator just goes straight into presenting content. The problem with missing out stage 2 is that the participants aren't given any **tools** to approach the task they'll be practising in stage 3. That's why it's stage 3 that often can't be fully included. This is particularly so if the group is larger than 5-6. Larger groups can split into Breakout rooms to **practise**, but then it's not easy for trainers to provide feedback to everyone.

However, what we've found is that **smaller** group sessions *do* lend themselves to our preferred three-stage teaching process. We've split our longer courses into two and sometimes three separate sections, run over a few weeks, interspersed with 1:1 coaching to really good effect.

And while we can't replicate this in a larger session, we always encourage solo follow-up work by furnishing the participants with course notes, recommendations for further reading, and links to our own online resources to embed what they've learnt on the course itself.

**Self-management** will be increasingly important in the world of hybrid working, and that includes workers taking responsibility for their own learning and professional development.

**KEY FINDING:** Online training can help with behaviour change, especially when there's opportunity for practice, feedback and follow-up work.

## Online or Face-to-Face?

The hybrid working model requires hybrid-style training: a mixture of online and face-to-face courses to reflect the communication challenges our clients are facing. We're confident that we can deliver effective training *whatever* the format, but certain courses may benefit more from being run either online or face-to-face.

### What works better online?

Topics more suited to remote delivery might include:

- Designing slide presentations (for either off or online)
- Effective business writing (crafting emails, reports and documents)
- Communicating/presenting online (to give people the necessary techniques for success)
- Hybrid working best practice (how to build inclusivity, agency, psychological safety, and run effective hybrid meetings)
- Some aspects of Critical Thinking (problem solving, group discussion)
- Some executive coaching situations (logistically helpful)

## What works better Face to Face?

Some topics will benefit from being run face-to-face, especially when people need to prepare for 'live' interactions with colleagues and clients in the room:

- Core teambuilding (such that body language and trust are felt viscerally)
- Preparation for live presentations and Q&A
- Some aspects of Executive Presence and Unconscious Bias
- Some components of Networking and Emotional Intelligence
- Leadership-focused training for experienced individuals

Encouragingly, we've found that our **1:1 and small-group coaching** works just as well online as it does face-to-face: there's exactly the same opportunity for in-depth discussion, reflection, practice and feedback. From now on we'll be able to offer a genuinely blended approach, and the ability to match trainees with the right coaches whatever their geographical location.

## Group Size

As discussed above, we're really excited by the potential for assembling large groups online: it gives us the chance to **reach more people with fewer sessions, no matter how widely distributed** they may be.

We've found that some large-group talks with certain audiences work *better* online than they do face-to-face, especially as the webinar format allows for more interactivity and genuine discussion. We'll continue to explore ways of making our large-group online offerings as engaging and instructive as possible – and we'll apply as much of that learning as we can to the way we deliver our face-to-face keynote talks. We've used some polling for instance, in our large-scale online talks, but all **our trainers have found the chat box a far more valuable resource**. That's because it allows us to elicit more expansive audience responses and contributions, and to 'read the room' more effectively. We'll look to replicate that when we're face-to-face.

We don't think that all training should follow the 'big-group' model: as we've said, smaller groups give more opportunity for practice, feedback and behavioural change. There's huge potential too, in offering a **series** of short, small-group online training sessions, perhaps coupled with **coaching** to really embed the learning. One great advantage of the hybrid/online model is that it sidesteps the perennial difficulty of scheduling sessions to coincide with training room availability. It's demanded a degree of agility – we've got used to responding more quickly to client requests and delivering training at shorter notice – and we've relished the challenge.

Alongside all that of course, we'll continue to offer our trademark face-to-face training for small or large groups, tailored to client needs.

## Blended Learning

The move towards remote/digital learning has been happening over the last two decades and was obviously accelerated by the pandemic. There's a clear consensus that 'best in class' training will combine all the different options:

- Digitally supported self-study (eLearning activities, reading, videos)
- Group sessions, online & F2F

- Coaching sessions (small-group and 1:1), online & F2F
- [Flipped](#) learning styles (where the learner works through theory/content online in their own time and then joins a class to practise and explore what they've learned with a facilitator).

## What the future will look like:

Over the next few years, expect to see the following features in the best quality training:

**Blended/Hybrid** – using the full range of methods: recorded, live, text, audio, video, training room, integrated into coherent packages

**Flipped** – using pre-work and back-up materials completed outside the training session so that precious contact time can be reserved for practice, interaction, and feedback

**Coached** – using the coaching model as a key driver in development, with learners able to access coaching more flexibly and readily

**Flexible** – learners pace their own learning and self-schedule elements of the program

**Tech savvy** – continuing best use of existing tech features (like chat and polls) and capitalising on the next wave of improvements in user-experience (e.g., spatial audio and the next generation of videoconferencing rooms)

**Event-centred** – Training face-to-face will be social, memorable, and a fully immersive experience

**eLearning - Micro Learning** – On the go, just in time tools to help busy people to learn quickly and flexibly

## Working Voices and You

### The Online Route

Some organisations are going to **commit to online/digital provision almost exclusively**. The benefits of universal, global access are tremendous. If that's you, we're looking forward to collaborating on how you plan to incorporate interactive, experiential elements to online offerings, maximising the impact on behaviour and thinking.

A digitally based learning program needs to be a **truly blended solution**. That means having an integrated package: text, video, and activities hosted digitally and dovetailed with live online sessions. To be most effective the different parts of the package must be interdependent: if you don't do the pre-work, the live session won't quite make sense, and if you don't do the live session the pre-work isn't enough. Up to now, so-called blended solutions haven't been properly integrated, and the supporting materials not valued or relied on, especially if they're viewed as optional extras.

### Utilising your LMS

How can we improve the blending? Most organisations have a **single portal or platform where a learner's progress is recorded i.e a Learning Management System**. Using the LMS to tick off each pre-work module before the live session and store the result is useful. And after the live session they can tick off the follow-up work.

## The Face-To-Face Route

However, if you're looking at how to **re-introduce F2F to your learning program**, we'd like to talk about how that works best for you. It's likely you'll want mixed provision: online and training room. The challenge now is to really make maximum use of those times when people get together in the same place. Your learners should expect an experience that's exciting, thought-provoking, and transformative when they leave their desks to attend. Working Voices has significant strength and experience in this format.

Whichever route you choose, we know you're not looking for 'back to normal' – and neither are we. The disruption to normal work practice has opened our eyes to what can be achieved. We look forward to working with you to improve the learning experience of your staff.

If you would like a conversation about this, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

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