

Tips for disrupted virtual learners and the organisations training them

By Matt Donovan

With the COVID-19 disruption, many of us are working through the new normal. Even though I have been a virtual learner for a while, I know I could use a little inspiration and refreshers for empowering myself and others on this bold new virtual learner journey.

Over the past few months, our challenge has been adjusting to a completely virtual learning environment, and one of the barriers is the overwhelming feeling of disconnection with others. You will probably become aware of how much we learn from others in real time and, for many of us, in informal face-to-face interactions.

Below are six tips to help learners transition to the new virtual learning conditions and tips for learning professionals to help them do so.

1. Don't wait; take action now

Don't wait until you need to figure something out. It may seem that we can put off learning until later, but I recommend making time each day to map your learning needs. Although there is no secret recipe for creating a dynamic, self-directed learning plan, the following is a best practice:

- Think about your learning goal.
- Begin with the end in mind.
- Assess your own capability.
- Leverage your internal and external networks to find communities of practice.
- Explore the full span of resources.
- Opt for new learning experiences.

When designing and developing a personal learning plan, it is important to recognise that not all learning needs are met in the same way. In an article for Learning Solutions Magazine, Conrad Gottfredson and Bob Mosher identify five different moments when learners need information or instruction. These moments of learning need can serve as a great framework for your personal learning map:

- Learn or do something for the first time.
- Learn or do more of something.

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- Apply and refine.
- Adjust to change.
- React when something fails or goes wrong.

Tips for the organisation:

- Collect and share examples of personal learning maps.
- Encourage learners to dig in and experiment with what works for them.

2. Expand your virtual learning network

As many of us are becoming aware, we rely on the people around us for all types of formal and informal learning. Take this opportunity to expand beyond your immediate circle of peers and traditional resources. You will need to develop some new “muscles” to find others who can guide you and thought leaders to follow. A strong network is critical in finding answers and insight when you are applying a new skill, when something has changed or when something goes wrong. Taking time to grow your network is fundamental to success.

One great way to expand your learning network is to offer your time and energy as a mentor or coach. These relationships can be ongoing or fit for purpose. If your organisation has a formal program, you can offer your time and expertise. Coaching or mentoring events can wrap around an active discussion, role-playing and problem-solving teams for performance feedback.

Tips for the organisation:

- Expand your coaching or mentoring programs to include micro-coaching or mentoring opportunities.
- Rethink how you are using your social collaboration platforms to increase connections among emerging mentors and coaches.
- An upside to all of the disruption we are facing is that we are facing it together.

3. Find and connect with the right communities

Learning communities are a core feature of your virtual learning network. An upside to all of the disruption we are facing is that we are facing it together. In addition to existing learning communities, we are seeing new ones appear. The members of these groups are doing what you do, facing the same challenges and overcoming them in different ways. The sooner you join and become a contributing member, the better prepared you will be.

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As we are pulled into our normal series of meetings, our individual feelings of isolation may grow. Individuals and organisations should invest time and energy in creating synchronous learning events that bring people together.

Tips for the organisation:

- Create group learning plans that leverage team-based learning goals.
- Build in rewards and recognition for virtual collaboration.
- Rethink how you are using web conferencing, chat rooms and social platforms to increase collaboration.

4. Share your emerging and evolving expertise

When it comes to growing your virtual learning network and communities, it's not a one-way relationship. You have a lot to learn, and you have a lot to share. Interestingly, when you do one, the other often comes more readily.

Finding valuable contributions not only builds confidence of others in the community, but it also organically grows your network as others consume and build upon your contributions. The word "valuable" may seem daunting, but valuable contributions are simply the ones that advance the conversation beyond simple likes, retweets or contradictions for the sake of contradictions. It's sharing your insights, best practices and innovations and the context in which you found them valuable.

Tips for the organisation:

- Proactively create micro-coaching and problem-solving opportunities.
- Explore, repurpose or expand the online training simulations and branching scenarios you have used in formal learning, and push them into your collaboration tools to see how they can grow organically.

5. Be curious

Move beyond the initial state of reaction, and create time and space where you cultivate your sense of curiosity. Although you are working through the new normal, your field of expertise continues to evolve every day. To stay competitive, keep scanning the radar for new trends and signals on the horizon that you should plan for and respond to. Always look for the next learning path.

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Tips for the organisation:

- Create space in individual learning plans to empower curiosity.
- Specifically recognise individuals who have demonstrated curiosity and developed a plan for nurturing it.
- Rethink how you are using web conferencing, chat rooms and your social platforms to increase collaboration.

6. Above all, be patient with yourself and your peers

Developing new skills and adjusting to a new normal take time. You will undoubtedly go through ebbs and flows of focus, concentration and energy to connect with others. Take time, take small steps and work together — encouraging each other along the journey.

Tips for the organisation:

- Encourage learners to treat every challenge or “failure” as an opportunity to grow.
- Reinforce that in this time of disruption, it is OK to take risks and find new approaches to emerging challenges.
- Use interactive activities to allow employees to test out different paths and see which leads to the desired outcome.
- Encourage learners to evaluate their own cognition to identify limiting beliefs or assumptions. For example, they may be performing the task incorrectly because they received the wrong information in the past.
- Give learners latitude to make mistakes to help them develop the ability to overcome obstacles and realize their potential.

If you are like me, you don’t have to look far for new trends in the way you work and start to identify the skills and knowledge you need to succeed. With all of the disruption in our work and personal lives, committing or recommitting to continuous learning is critical. I encourage you to take ownership of your learning journey, commit to small actions, make it a daily activity and find what works for you.

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