

No Going Back: The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Corporate Language and Communication Training

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ABSTRACT

This is an opinion piece written in Cologne, Germany, during the initial months of the COVID-19 outbreak. Information at this stage is preliminary and fast-moving. The objective here is to provide a personal view of the likely impact of the phenomenon. I have based my opinion on various communications from management consulting groups, non-governmental organizations, investment banks, learning and development professionals, education specialists and training outfits. The views expressed here are my own and are in no way intended to reflect the views of my employer.

Keywords: corporate learning and development; online delivery; pandemic response, disruption; education; digital transformation; language and communication training; digital pedagogy.

Introduction

In this paper I will argue that the COVID-19 outbreak and the associated corporate response will trigger an unprecedented expansion of digitally mediated language and communication training worldwide. I will further argue that this is not likely to be a temporary phenomenon, but rather a deep shift to a new normal as human behavioural patterns adapt.

My argument consists of the following component claims:

- 1) COVID-19 will have both a severe and long-lasting impact on business operations globally
- 2) COVID-19 has acted as an accelerator, generally causing existing trends to surge ahead dramatically.
- 3) The shift to remote work will continue to accelerate due to the need to protect the health of employees, as well as the cost-savings involved in reducing corporate office space expenditure
- 4) Remote work will be increasingly efficient and therefore widespread due to the implementation of 5G telecommunication networks and software for virtual collaboration

- 5) There is a meaningful qualitative difference between unmediated and computer-mediated communication
- 6) Computer-mediated language and communication training requires specialist digital pedagogy
- 7) Specialist digital training providers are best-placed to provide resilient and effective training solutions
- 8) Specialist digital training fits within the existing trend toward digital transformation of corporate learning and development, which is being accelerated by COVID-19.

My conclusion is therefore that specialist digital training providers are likely to dominate corporate language and communication training in the years of the COVID-19 impact and indeed, thereafter.

The body of the text will address each of these premises in turn.

COVID-19 will have both a severe and long-lasting impact on business operations globally

In the period between 31 December 2019, when it was first reported to the World Health Organization, and the

time of writing, 10 May 2020, COVID-19 has infected over four million people and killed just short of 280 000. (WHO, 2020). World governments have responded with severe measures aimed at limiting interpersonal contact in order to prevent healthcare systems from collapsing. This has meant that massive numbers of white collar workers cannot return to the office. Leading virologists do not agree on when lockdowns may be lifted and there is an ongoing threat of second and third waves before a vaccine or treatment may be found. Senior economists are now openly comparing the impact to that which triggered the Great Depression of the 1930s (Braun, 2020).

Phenomena of this scale have historically caused lasting social changes that outlast the trigger events. The Boston Consulting Group (2020) expect COVID-19 to have a similar effect on attitudes, policymaking, ways of working and consumer behaviour.

COVID-19 has acted as an accelerator, generally causing existing trends to surge ahead dramatically.

The pandemic has allowed us to observe in real-time the accuracy of Frank Snowden’s thesis that “infectious diseases have shaped social evolution no less powerfully than have wars, revolutions and economic crises.” (Spinney, 2019). It is increasingly apparent that COVID-19 has brought forward changes that would have occurred anyway. Frances Donald, chief economist at Manulife Investment Management, made this point in a recent Bloomberg appearance. “...we’re compressing what would typically happen over a twelve month or longer period into a three- or four-month period” (Donald, 2020).

Interestingly, the view from Asia, where the virus has generally been better managed than in the West (Deep Knowledge Group, 2020), is that online education is

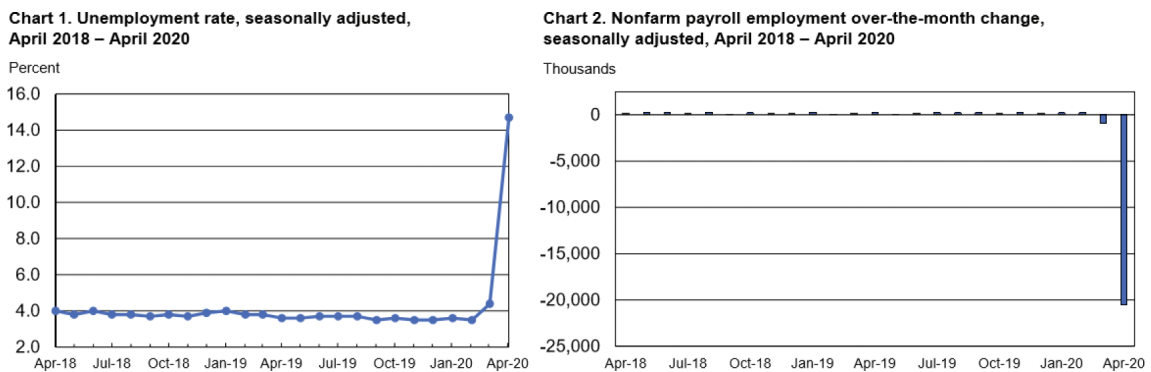


Figure 1: United States of America Bureau of Labour Statistics April 2018-April 2020



Figure 2: Boston Consulting Group diagram: Crises often lead to Long-lasting Changes

surging at a rate never before experienced. The dam wall has broken and behavioural change long predicted has materialized. While there is debate to be had regarding the degree to which the Asian experience can be generalized as a guide to the future of West, the magnitude of the phenomenon bears close observation. The *Financial Times* reports that Asian edtech startups simply cannot cope with the increased demand. "...one Chinese provider, Yuanfudao, suffered a two-hour system crash last month after 5 million people took up its offer of free live courses, the company said" (Ruehl et al. 2020).

In geographies such as China and India, which are so vast that rolling out a brick and mortar school infrastructure would be prohibitively expensive and where finding sufficient locally-based native-level instructors to meet demand has proven increasingly difficult, there is a serious shift to remote solutions. "Online learning is the future and if there was no virus, that realization would have taken another few years, but this has accelerated the process," said Li Kang, Ai English executive director (Ruehl, 2020).

The shift to remote work will continue to accelerate due to the need to protect the health of employees, as well as the cost-savings involved in reducing corporate office space expenditure

There is a great deal of pressure on companies to return to pre-COVID levels of productivity. However, the health and safety of employees is an integral element of a sustainable return to growth. (World Economic Forum, 2020) One key avenue available to employers has been that of expanded remote work. Already a rapidly developing trend, working from home has boomed as a result of the pandemic. HR industry analyst Josh Bersin held a webcast in late March 2020 featuring seven of the world's leading HR figures. On his blog, he reports that "Diane Gherson (CHRO of IBM) told us that today 95% of IBM's workers are remote." (Bersin, 2020). A March 17 survey of over 800 global human resources executives by the market research company, Gartner, showed that 88% of organizations have encouraged or required their employees to work from home and that 97% of organizations have cancelled work-related travel (Gartner, 2020).

Remote work will be increasingly efficient and therefore widespread due to the implementation of 5G telecommunication networks and software for virtual collaboration

McKinsey Global Managing Partner Kevin Sneader believes that remote work is here to stay. "The shift [to working]

online has now been given a boost, and it's hard to see that being taken back to where it was before." (McKinsey, 2020). One of the reasons for this assertion is the increasing efficiency of the remote work model. In the past, one of the most critical obstacles to successful home office collaboration was to do with the coordination of virtual team project work. Documents were often inaccessible, video and audio connections of poor quality and team rapport weak. This is changing rapidly. Josh Bersin (2020) actually states that "Microsoft Teams may be one of the *most successful products* ever built." An integrated file sharing, videoconferencing and chat application, Microsoft Teams has experienced a surge in users, adding 12 million users in a single week during the COVID-19 pandemic, and reaching 44 million users globally (Paayal, 2020).

Software applications have previously struggled to ensure smooth virtual collaboration due to slow data transmission speeds. A major trend concurrent with the pandemic is that of the implementation of 5G (fifth-generation) telecommunications infrastructure and the two combined phenomena are driving change deeply and rapidly. With Internet speeds reaching 100 times faster than current infrastructure will allow (Ericsson, 2020), cloud-based solutions will surge ahead. Through this revolution, combined with haptic technology to convey touch through the internet, many more types of work will become feasible remotely. The implications of this revolution are enormous. Companies will be able to avoid extortionate rental or purchase costs for real estate in sought-after locations. Geography – for the most part of the employee base – will become irrelevant if time zone differences can be managed. People may choose to live outside of densely populated areas, knowing that physical commuting will be a thing of the past.

"Over the next five years, 5G will enable the workforce to become more distributed," states David Linthicum, chief cloud strategy officer at Deloitte Consulting, "You can be anywhere and have access to unlimited bandwidth." (Field, 2020)

China has led the world in the pursuit of the hard technological capacity to enable next generation internet speeds. In late 2019, they launched "the largest commercial operating 5G network in the world." (Zhao, 2019). The issue is so important that it has sparked major geopolitical discussion regarding China's rise as a major world power. Nations that develop 5G faster will hold a considerable economic advantage over those who lag behind.

National European governments also plan for an imminent, large-scale rollout of 5G infrastructure. Germany

plans 100 mbit/second speeds in 98% of households by the end of 2022. Importantly, “National mobile operators agreed to...provide reliable voice and data services in 99% of households nationwide by the end of 2020” (European Commission).

In the USA, Verizon CEO Hans Vestberg has said that “half the U.S. will have access to 5G by the end of 2020.” (Wasserman, 2020) Major investments are being made by the US government to fast-track 5G implementation and as Todd Wasserman reports for CNBC, the Coronavirus pandemic may be the “catalyst for 5G that the world needs” (ibid).

There is a meaningful qualitative difference between unmediated and computer-mediated communication

When employees communicate using virtual team software, they are engaging in new and complex behaviours that traditional language instruction does not prepare them for. The Council of Europe updated the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages accordingly, including descriptors for online communication. As the Companion Volume of 2018 states:

There are emergent properties of group interaction online that are almost impossible to capture in traditional competence scales focusing on the individual’s behaviour in speech or in writing.

The European Commission, 2018

The new descriptors cover specific aspects of online communication. Importantly, under the section “Goal-oriented online transactions and collaboration” the authors note that “the rigid separation between written and oral does not really apply to online transactions” (ibid, 2018). Indeed, modern business communication is often multimodal, combining documents, images, videos, audio tracks and live speech. Moreover, the collaborative nature of modern online work means that document drafting often requires synchronous, as well as asynchronous coordination with colleagues. An example of a high-level descriptor is the following “Can participate in complex projects requiring collaborative writing and redrafting as well as other forms of online collaboration, following and relaying instructions with precision in order to reach the goal” (ibid, 2018).

Pragmatics, the study of how language use is influenced by the context of its use, provides a useful lens from which to view the specifics of online communication. The simple fact that employees are using video links and chat

tools to communicate alters the unwritten rules of proper practice. While appropriateness is always important in society, it is arguable that the stakes are higher at work. (Waugh, 2013). How does one politely request the floor in a Microsoft Teams call, for example, without interrupting the flow of the speaker? How can one discreetly request access to a document that they are not able to view?

Computer-mediated communication requires specialist digital pedagogy

It is not enough for corporations to simply combine virtual collaboration tools and existing face-to-face teachers and curricula. Organizations are now discovering that the rollout of effective solutions requires deeper consideration than may previously have been assumed.

...one of the most important lessons of the forced adoption of remote instruction may turn out to be the realization that pedagogy, rather than technology, is the key ingredient for delivering effective education online.

Genone, 2020

We have established that computer-mediated communication differs qualitatively from traditional modes of communication and that reputable institutions have begun to address this with a view toward education and training. We are now at the point that a specialist digital pedagogy has begun to emerge.

Teacher roles have expanded to build on the existing subset of skills required by traditional classroom teaching to include first-level IT support for learners, mastery of virtual classroom software, integration of web-based multimedia resources and more.

Task-based learning is a methodological approach used in language and communication training that focuses on the completion of real-world tasks. (Nunan, 2004) This approach fits well within the online delivery mode and the ideal instructor is a “skilful, responsive, knowledgeable teacher who is able to cope with groups of learners and access relevant material as the need arises” (Skehan, 2002, p. 295).

Learning material and role-play/simulation activities must also adapt for use in this environment. Given that corporate communication has shifted to an online mode, authentic tasks for communicative language lessons must reflect the changing environment. Leading and participating in virtual meetings are skills that now underpin success in global projects. As Long (2016) argues,

communicative tasks that have the resolution of realistic problems as a central goal, help learners to deploy target language as a pragmatic tool at work.

Specialist digital training providers are best-placed to provide resilient and effective training solutions

As Josh Bersin (2020) points out, “Black swan events are here to stay.” As humankind negotiates global warming, sea level rising, wars, terrorism and so on, our ways of working will be disrupted further. The concept of resilience in training solutions will be increasingly critical when corporations carry out risk assessments.

Employee training and development programs are the first things that corporations cut in times of recession.... but far-sighted leaders will.... keep investments in programs that support education delivery systems that are better able to withstand a variety of crisis scenarios.

Horn, 2020

As in the parable of the grasshopper and the ant, those who have made serious provisions will find themselves in a far stronger position than those who have not. Forward-looking human resource departments have been strengthening their digital capacity for years. The lesson learned is that this investment has enabled much-needed continuity in this crisis. I would fully expect expanded digital programs in future to receive funding as a result.

I would add that almost everything we’ve done over the last ten years (cloud platforms, focus on employee experience, understanding employee journeys, implementing people analytics) is all coming together with this new focus on crisis response and resilience. You need all these programs to respond in a vigorous and local way to this crisis.

Bersin, 2020

The online learning industry moves forward in fits and starts and it seems that we are in the middle of a dramatic phase of change. Industry insider Josh Bersin senses another major shift in motion:

I’ve been a part of the online learning industry since the beginning (around 1998), and it is an enormous marketplace that quickly adapts to trends. Whenever a big tech or social change occurs, the market adapts quickly.

Bersin, 2020

There is certainly fertile ground as the learning and development industry is in need of deep and drastic change.

Learning and development departments are struggling to convince the board of the business impact of their training interventions. This can be the difference between further funding of a training initiative, or its cancellation, even in good times.

...despite more than \$300 billion spent globally on corporate training and education each year, much of it is considered ineffective—and most likely *is* ineffective. One survey found only 8% of CEOs saw a business impact from learning and development (L&D).

Christensen, 2020

This is where learning analytics and reporting dashboards will come into their own. With these tools it is possible to gather and translate large, complex data sets regarding training efficacy into visually meaningful graphics. According to Omer (2019), there are perhaps four key areas in which this data can be used to align with corporate strategic interests:

- a) Descriptive analytics – tracking data like course enrolment, completion of exercises, test scores and missed sessions allows training managers to see what is happening on the ground. In globally distributed teams, having this information in one place makes life a lot easier for those responsible for the success of training programs.
- b) Diagnostic analytics – data may be used to determine why certain phenomena have occurred. Employees from different national offices may have scored radically differently on the same learning assessment. Perhaps employees at different hierarchy levels have behaved differently. The data allows learning and development professionals to track and form hypotheses as to why things may have happened.
- c) Predictive analytics – this is a critical area and one that will become more important in the future. Large datasets enable observers to make educated guesses as to what is likely to happen in the future. This can act as a useful early warning signal where learner behavior (missing a certain percentage of classes, scoring below a certain amount on a test) may fit a pattern of learners who have later dropped out of courses.
- d) Prescriptive analytics – by analyzing data that covers what learners actually know and what the strategic aims of the company require them to know, course content may be accurately composed.

Specialist digital training fits within the existing trend toward digital transformation of corporate learning and development, which is being accelerated by COVID-19.

It is my view that corporate learning and development solutions will mirror the shift in working models. It stands to reason, for example, in the field of language and communication training that training should be conducted in the same delivery mode as the majority of business communication. Creating a return on investment for corporate buyers requires a transfer of skills to the point of work. Levels 3 and 4 of the Kirkpatrick Model (Kirkpatrick Partners 2020) refer to changed behavior and the level of influence that training has on work performance. It follows logically that virtually delivered training for participating in meetings, for example, should transfer to better performance in virtually-held meetings and therefore less waste, more efficiency and associated cost-saving. In other words, when business was conducted face-to-face, training was correctly held face-to-face. Now that the dominant mode of business meetings has changed, training should follow suit.

Certainly investors and management consulting firms are in line with this prediction. "Online education is an irresistible trend," said Claudia Wang, a partner at Oliver Wyman, the consultancy. "There is a lot of online tutoring, and we expect the paid user base to double or triple in 2020 . . . and customer acquisition costs should fall drastically in the short term" (Ruehl, 2020).

Conclusions and Suggestions

As discussed in this paper, it is my view that changes made during the intense initial phases of the pandemic, may be retained on their merits. For example, once HR departments have seen how well teams have collaborated using remote working tools, they are likely to reevaluate their rental expenses on office space. Once employees are used their new habits, they will be loath to give them up. As Frida Polli, CEO of Pymetrics told Martin Reeves of the Boston Consulting Group in a recent interview "Once that threshold has been crossed, it's really hard to say, "I'm not going to do that anymore." (Reeves, 2020)

We are likely to see a business world with less business travel, a more digital business world, a more crisis-conscious business world that is prepared to make deep changes without warning. Agile specialist digital training institutions will flourish as vast numbers of employees need to be reskilled and upskilled.

In closing, however, I would stress that technological solutions are not in themselves a panacea and that not all organizations are currently able to take advantage of the benefits of online delivery. Development of the technological infrastructure is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for effective large-scale digital training. It should not be forgotten, as the World Bank (2020) points out: "much greater challenges relate to supporting teachers so that they can in turn support learners in a new learning environment."

Competing Interests Statement

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

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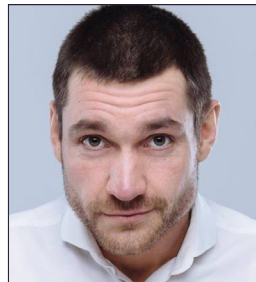
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