

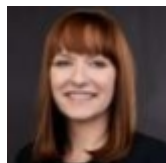
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BLOG

Ideas and insights from Harvard Business Publishing
Corporate Learning

Coaching for Human Skills: Fresh Approaches from Top Learning Leaders



by Abbey Lewis | July 19, 2021

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Through our learning leader discussions at the Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning 2021 Partners' Meeting [<https://www.harvardbusiness.org/partners-meeting-2021-its-a-wrap/>]. — *Learn, Lead, Illuminate* —we identified 5 key human skills [<https://www.harvardbusiness.org/5-key-human-skills-to-thrive-in-the-future-digital-workplace/>] that are crucial for leaders if they are to succeed in a rapidly changing digital future.

High on the list were empathy, communication, and trust-building skills. These all serve as a foundation for building deep connections at work with colleagues and customers, which ultimately translates to positive business outcomes.

Our conversation with organization development leaders led to the trickier question: How do we develop human skills in the current and future digital age—and in a way that's actually scalable and gets applied in daily interactions?

Here are some insights gathered from our conversations:

Scale Coaching Using Technology

Coaching remains one of the fundamental ways that organizations help employees develop better human skills. An important human skill itself, it can be difficult to scale when it's done on a one-to-one basis. And traditional human skills coaching practices (like roleplays) can sometimes feel awkward or unrealistic and ultimately ineffective with someone the individual knows.

Our participants offered several ideas of how their organizations are overcoming these issues. Many

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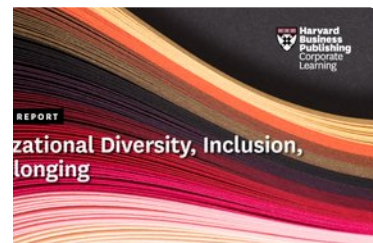


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involved the use of technology. For example, some are already using coaching apps that provide online sessions with external coaches along with learning content that's accessible at any time. This helps to increase the scalability of coaching across organizations, as individuals can access their own sessions asynchronously and at their own pace.

The use of virtual reality or simulations to recreate workplace situations as an alternative to real-life roleplaying was another solution that came up amongst participants. It's especially valuable for those that find doing these exercises with colleagues or managers uncomfortable. It can also address high-risk situations that are difficult to practice, such as handling an issue with a high-value client. A simulated environment provides people with a safe space to make mistakes and try different things in simulated scenarios.

Digital learning experiences can help hone human skills and fit the different needs of businesses in customizable ways. Other approaches that participants had tried or hoped to try this year to develop human skills were:

- Peer coaching circles and community or social learning
- Virtual reality coaching
- Coaching chatbots
- Team/group coaching
- Virtual, mobile or on-demand coaching platforms

The Human Factor Must Stay Central

While technology will be at the forefront of enhancing human skills, several participants

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emphasized that the human aspect needs to remain at the heart of what they are trying to achieve.

This is why several participants stressed that there is still value in check-ins with peer-to-peer coaching groups or HR-manager groups. Smaller communities give people an opportunity to share experiences, brainstorm ideas, and grow alongside a trusted circle of individuals.

And using technology does not mean setting humanity and personalization aside. Technology can be applied to make human skill development more organic and individualized to suit each person's unique personality and needs—rather than a one-size-fits-all solution.

Motivate Through Experiential Learning

During the meeting, we also addressed the broader theme of maintaining enough motivation to persist in learning new skills.

This is especially important in the workplace, where leaders are challenged to juggle several priorities at the same time—so developing new skills often gets left to the wayside.

The biggest obstacle to skill development?

According to a recent study.

[<https://www.harvardbusiness.org/insight/how-the-workforce-learns-in-2019/>], it often comes down to the perceived lack of time. To overcome this issue, the importance of utilizing experiential methods of learning can increase the likelihood of human skills being developed and retained.

To achieve this, learning activities should be:

- **Interesting:** Is your practice task actually fun and engaging?
- **Challenging:** Is the level of difficulty at the right level so it's not too easy but not too hard either?
- **Right-sized:** The challenge has to be small enough so that it's achievable and corresponds to the level of motivation.
- **Applicable:** Do your simulations, challenges, or roleplays feel useful and applicable to the person's role, industry and level of experience?
- **Approachable:** Are your learning experiences easy to access for diverse learning populations?
- **Volitional:** Are participants engaging in the activities out of their own desire and interest?

Human skills coaching is an exciting space—especially when we consider the technology available to everyone in this day and age. But it's also important to balance out these digital conveniences with personalized, or in-person coaching—to keep human skills “human”.

From bite-sized, in-the-moment advice and tips for common challenges to more in-depth exploration of real-world challenges at the learner's pace, it is important to provide the right resources at the right time – in the flow of work. Whatever the approach, we're all looking for more harmonious and meaningful connections in our digital and physical workplaces.

What new approaches does your organization plan to adopt to help people develop human skills?

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