

Online learning will be second nature to a new generation of graduates: companies should take advantage of that



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The past few months have seen massive disruption to academic years around the globe. Students who started the year on campus may end up finishing it at home. Keeping the academic year going has meant adapting to remote learning for learners and educators. But unlike some of their schoolgoing counterparts (and their parents), the current generation of students has been primed for remote and online learning.

Along with the skills they've learned during their studies, these students will enter the workplace with the ability to navigate online learning platforms with ease (notwithstanding the challenges being posed by a widening digital divide). Rather than trying to make them conform to traditional training and skills development programmes, companies should embrace their ability to do things differently as a strength. Utilised properly, their experiences could help the organisations they work for not only evolve their training and skills development programmes, but also become more adaptable to a constantly shifting business environment.

Built for online learning

In July, Harvard's decision to hold all its undergraduate courses online for the coming semester attracted headlines from several major publications. Soon after, other prominent universities followed suit.

In South Africa, universities have done everything they can to facilitate online learning (not an easy task given South Africa's entrenched inequalities), even as limited numbers of students return to campus.

As strange as that might seem to those of us who studied in the hustle and bustle of a physical campus (an environment which undoubtedly has value), online learning in and of itself isn't a remarkable concept to most students.

Most universities put their course materials online years ago, with students routinely submitting assignments online, collaborating virtually on group projects, and scouring the web for the kind of resources their predecessors could only have dreamed of. Covid-19 has simply accelerated the pace at which learning institutions have adopted full scale online learning. The benefits of the proliferation in learning online include its ability to provide learners with vast bodies of literature at the click of a mouse, cumulative content that might have otherwise taken days or weeks to find through libraries and encyclopaedias.

While the change in conditions may have come as a shock to them, they have likely handled the shift to doing things wholly online more readily than many office workers.

Bringing new skills to the workplace

When the current cohort of students graduates and enters the workplace, they'll bring this new norm with them. This is especially true of the training and skills development spheres.

Whereas current employees might expect face-to-face training and workshops (as well as the attendant travel and accommodation), those about to enter the workplace simply won't have the same views. If they can get the same accreditation with an online course and it costs the company nothing more than the odd day of study leave (if that), why shouldn't they take that route instead?

As older employees see their younger counterparts developing valuable skills flexibly and at a pace that suits them, they'll quickly come to see the advantages of online learning. Certainly, there will be some traditionally-minded holdouts but they'll soon become a vanishingly small minority. The adaptability of those who can embrace new ways of learning (and doing business) will overwhelm them.

The online learning moment

So many growing trends (remote work, video conferencing) have seen as much growth in the past five months as they did in the five years preceding them. Remote and online learning, already a US\$200-billion industry, should be no exception.

As companies search for more accredited online courses to fulfil their BBEE skills spend requirements, it is now clear that online learning's moment has been coming for a long time. It's here now and companies should take advantage of that through partnerships such as Masterstart that have partnered up with well-established business schools to offer online courses that can be claimed as category A or B for skills spend purposes.

Many companies have already embraced online learning as they look to upskill their employees. Over the next few years, however, it will go from something trendy and new to the default way of doing things. Employees will demand it and companies will ultimately benefit from acceding to those demands.