

# Workplace training without the water cooler

*How assessments can help employers make good decisions around 'organic learning' when the workforce is increasingly working from home*



Questionmark Viewpoint

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## Introduction

While many are eager to analyze which industries will survive the Covid-19 crisis, it's clearly too early to tell. The situation is ongoing and social distancing measures linger. The tumultuous events of 2020 could provide more twists and turns before the year is out.

But it is possible to make one bold prediction: organizations that are investing in their people will be the ones that continue to thrive. As this report demonstrates, early evidence suggests that those that are making a priority of training are beginning to reap the rewards.

As the world moved to widespread remote working overnight, new skills were quickly required.

- Did employees really know how to work productively from home?
- Did the workforce have the skills to keep pace with the level of change that the external environment demanded?
- Could a culture of collaboration survive the absence of physical contact?

Online learning makes training at a distance possible. Without the commute, employees gain more time for training and their appetite for learning has soared.<sup>1</sup> Savvy employers are encouraging their interest.

But how much of the knowledge and skills that employees need to develop originates from formal training?

To what extent are good habits developed through watching colleagues at work and imitating best practice?

How much are workers missing now that conversations at the water cooler have been eliminated from our daily routines?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education-and-careers/2020/04/24/lockdown-learning-the-skills-employers-looking-can-get/>

This report establishes that, despite a commitment to formal training, crucial skills are beginning to diminish.

Based on conversations with customers, we argue that without the organic learning that face to face contact brings, there is a danger that knowledge and skills are not passing from one colleague to another. This could contribute negatively to culture and damage productivity and competitiveness.

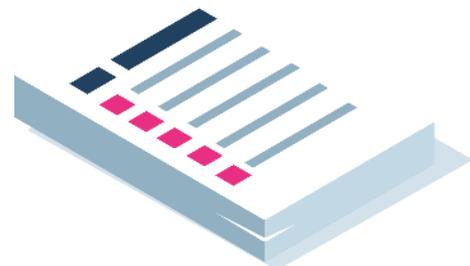
But working from home has also brought many advantages. Many employers simply won't want to go back to the way things were. That means the future of training must be reimagined.

Now more than ever, employers must make good decisions about how they manage and develop their people. The data from staff assessments can give them the information they need to make better decisions.

This report demonstrates how assessments can identify problems, point the way to solutions and help employers make the right people-decisions, rethink training and preserve productivity.

## Questionmark Viewpoint

Questionmark Viewpoint is a series of white papers and reports that we produce to explore the challenges that our customers are facing, and which we help them address. These papers are based on what we are hearing from customers, and on research from other experts.



## The power of formal training

When the world first switched to widespread remote working, it was clear that formal training programs would have to change.

When it looked like lockdown measures might last just a few weeks, some employers may not have felt that training was a priority. But as it became clear that working from home would become common for the medium term, many began to think how employees could engage with effective training remotely.

Those that did, look set to be rewarded. Employers across sectors and industries are already noticing that their endeavors are bearing fruit.

- **Performance** – 67% of organizations report that creating learning opportunities has been crucial to enabling their workforce to remain agile throughout the pandemic. Forty percent of business leaders expect to rely on their employees' digital capabilities more heavily than before as they adjust to the challenges brought about by the pandemic.<sup>2</sup>
- **Agility** - employers that were quick to adjust have put a strong emphasis on developing skills that will be transferable among several job roles.<sup>3</sup> It is widely appreciated that the business environment is constantly shifting. To thrive in the future, organizations will need to show new levels of versatility. Individual employees will be expected to do the same.
- **Focused** – training experts have noted that training tailored to the individual is having a greater impact.<sup>4</sup> Employers cannot easily create distinct training content for each employee. But they can point staff in the direction of existing online courses. As well as being more relevant to the individual, this approach helps an employee take control of their career development. Even though employees can access much of this training independently, 38% prefer to engage with courses recommended by

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.fenews.co.uk/press-releases/50504-businesses-that-have-invested-in-training-during-lockdown-expect-to-recover-more-quickly>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.trainingzone.co.uk/develop/talent/which-skills-are-learners-honing-during-lockdown>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.trainingzone.co.uk/develop/talent/which-skills-are-learners-honing-during-lockdown>

their employer.<sup>5</sup>

- **Motivation** – employees appreciate the chance to learn transferable skills. They recognize that, should they need to change jobs or sectors, learning new skills increases their employability.<sup>6</sup> This can increase their motivation to learn new skills and apply them to their current role.



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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/lockdown-drives-high-demand-for-online-learning/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.trainingzone.co.uk/develop/talent/which-skills-are-learners-honing-during-lockdown>

## Working without the water cooler: the loss of organic learning

When employers continue to invest in the formal training of remote workers, employees continue to upskill. But it is becoming increasingly clear that without bumping into each other at the water cooler and observing one another in the office, crucial knowledge and skills are not being transferred from one colleague to another.

The informal role of office life has always been critical to developing new skills. It could be by learning from experts, or being able to drop by someone's desk for a quick word about a problem.

Informal coaching and mentoring have always played an important role. They complement formal training programs. They help teams embed structured learning into their context and culture. But it is now becoming clear just how responsible this 'organic learning' was for skills development and knowledge sharing within organizations.

Our customers tell us that the following seven skills are diminishing among the remote workforce.

1. **Empathy** – co-working across teams and business functions depends on a shared understanding of each other's pressures and 'pain-points.' Without observing the stresses and strains of daily life for colleagues, workers are less able to understand each other's perspectives and priorities. This can hinder cooperation.
2. **Organic communication** – thanks to collaboration apps and video conferencing, colleagues can remain in almost constant communication. However, without informal conversations happening across desks, managers are less clear on what team members are working on at any given point. This can create concerns over priorities and deadlines.
3. **Teamwork** – although technology makes it perfectly possible, workers are less likely to ask colleagues to 'look over their shoulder' virtually as they work on a document or try and solve a particular problem. Fewer brains than previously may be inputting into smaller but important projects.
4. **Time management** – on the face of it, working from home is a productivity plus. Employees can stay logged-on for longer. But the absence a train to catch or a rush-

hour to miss means workers have less structure to the day. This can have a knock-on effect to planning work and managing time.

5. **Focus** – flexibility can be the enemy of focus. Without the ‘peer pressure’ of colleagues informally observing productivity, tasks can expand to fit the seemingly endless time available.
6. **Creativity** – while studies have indicated that productivity can be higher when working from home, creativity may be in jeopardy.<sup>7</sup> Innovation often happens spontaneously when people and their projects accidentally bump into each other.
7. **Collaborative efficiency** – research suggests that projects are often completed faster when colleagues develop subtle codes of communication. These can include looks, gestures, and body language. This is hard to develop when people are not physically together.<sup>8</sup>

The difficulty in developing and exercising these skills can create problems within team culture. Their absence can damage engagement and affect productivity and competitiveness.

According to our customers, the loss of these skills is particularly noticeable in the following scenarios:

- **Business functions that depend on ‘unconscious training’**– training colleagues informally is one thing. Training them by accident is quite another. However, in certain environments, such as sales or customer service, colleagues may have been subconsciously observing and learning from each other. This was constantly sharpening best practice and is hard to replicate remotely.
- **Onboarding of new starters** – HR teams have worked hard to ensure that people joining organizations during a time of remote working have been brought up to speed with policies and protocols. However, it has become clear to many employers that much of the authentic onboarding process happens organically. This can

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/technology/working-from-home.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/11/when-working-from-home-doesnt-work/540660/>

include quietly asking friendly colleagues to clarify something to observing interactions across the office.

- ***Training the next generation*** – younger workers who are new to their career are not just learning the tricks of the trade. They are also discovering how to work. Without colleagues to ‘watch in action’, it is proving difficult to ensure they are equipped with the subtle skills to succeed.



## Making better decisions with assessments

To make better decisions around training, employers need a clear picture of the actual situation.

That means having robust information about the current state of play and the effectiveness of potential or existing strategies and initiatives.

While this has long been the case, the uncertainties caused by Covid-19 and a constantly shifting business environment make this even more crucial. It is also even more difficult, as it is no longer possible to gather information by walking the floor and picking up on the informal backchannels.

There are three broad areas in which staff assessments can give managers valuable data to help them make better decisions around training, management and teamwork.

### *1) Creating effective formal training*

By assessing staff before training takes place, employers can determine which vital skills are missing. Training can be tailored accordingly. It can also ensure people who are already proficient in a particular area do not have to participate.

Assessments help create individual training plans for workers. This helps ensure that training is maximized and that employees will engage with the program.

Across the world, \$130 billion is spent on learning and development programs. Research shows that only 25% of it is judged to be effective.<sup>9</sup> By assessing staff during and after training, managers can judge whether it has successfully imparted the necessary knowledge.

### *2) Reimagining business processes*

Good employers have long recognized that line management, mentoring and leadership contain both a structured and informal dimension. But since widespread remote working

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<sup>9</sup> <https://trainlikeachampion.blog/infographic-why-corporate-training-is-a-colossal-waste-and-what-to-do-about-it/>

was introduced, it has become clear that they were more dependent on organic knowledge transfer than was previously appreciated.

Assessments can reveal where crucial communications breakdowns are occurring and where information is failing to circulate. This can lead to better decisions around:

- *Line management* – is the regularity, structure and content of discussions with direct reports sufficient to meet needs in the new environment?
- *Onboarding processes* – in a world where many of the ‘basics’ are not being picked up organically, what needs to be communicated more intentionally as new starters join?
- *Best practice sharing* – workers are used to observing successful colleagues in action. Without even knowing it, they were being shown examples of how to do their jobs better. Should employers be more intentional about promoting good work in a world where some of it happens in isolation? Assessments can indicate which employees are performing well and are likely to have generated work worth sharing.
- *Internal certification programs* - when a colleague, particularly one new to their career, is being constantly observed, managers can judge the progress they are making. In an environment where this is not possible, is it worth considering introducing internal certification programs that allow workers to work toward established goals, formally assessing their progress on the way?

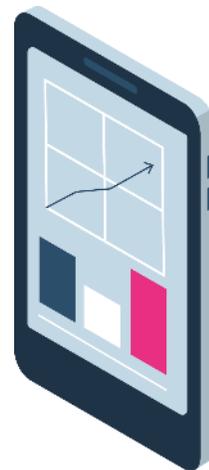
### 3) *Creating connection*

Employers must consider how to recreate the face-to-face moments that enable organic learning to thrive.

Many are in no rush to bring staff back to the office. Some are considering making working from home the standard procedure for the long term. However, most recognize the need to ensure that team members have some face-to-face contact. This might be in the form of regular informal meet ups or designating days where certain teams or business functions work from the office.

Assessments can give employers the information they need to make these meet ups meaningful. By identifying which skills are in jeopardy, appropriate action can be taken when teams are together. Assessments can reveal where teams are struggling to understand the role, needs or priorities of other colleagues. 'Work from the office' days can be structured so that relevant teams are together.

As new initiatives are piloted, regular assessment of the workforce will provide information on whether they are working. Changes can be made accordingly, and different strategies can be deployed as need and circumstances continue to evolve.



## Conclusion

Since the world went into lockdown, workforces across sectors and industries have adjusted to radical change. Employers that have invested in training and development of workers have been able to use this to their advantage. They have helped workers develop skills that will enable them to meet the challenges of a constantly shifting business environment.

But crucial skills have begun to diminish. Without the organic learning provided by physically working together, knowledge and skills are not passing seamlessly from colleague to colleague. It is becoming increasingly clear these ‘water cooler moments’ were vital to organizational development.

Assessments of the workforce give employers the robust information they need to make good people decisions around managing this transition. They identify specific problems and help plot a path toward a solution. Ongoing assessments can give employers confidence that the strategies they have introduced are working.

We are the world’s leading provider of online assessments. We have helped employers across the world transform their training programs and build a constructive culture. We would love to begin a conversation with other employers about how we can help them do the same.





## About Questionmark

We help organizations and their people unlock their potential to deliver better performance.

Questionmark provides a secure enterprise-grade assessment platform and professional services to leading organizations around the world, delivered with care and unequalled expertise. Its full-service online assessment tool and professional services help customers to improve their performance and meet their compliance requirements. Questionmark enables organizations to unlock their potential by delivering assessments which are valid, reliable and fair, which can be defended.

Questionmark offers secure powerful integration with learning management systems (LMS), learning record stores (LRS) and proctoring services making it easy to bring everything together in one place. Questionmark's cloud-based assessment management platform offers rapid deployment, scalability for high-volume test delivery, 24/7 support, and the peace-of-mind of secure, audited U.S., Australian and European-based data centers.

## Working with Questionmark

To further explore how Questionmark could work for your organization, or to book a free consultation and demo, please see: <https://www.questionmark.com/request-demo/>

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