



Introduction

Welcome to LAS Insights, where we take a look at some of the bigger issues affecting work and learning.

In this first episode, we look at COVID and the effect it might have on work in three to five year's time. We've investigated 5 megatrends and the impact that COVID looks to be having upon them. Using this data, we paint a picture of how work could look in the near future. We then consider what L&D departments need to do to support their organisations, then rewind to the present to identify the steps that L&D need to take now. The whole LAS Insights episode is available from las-hq.com

Episode 1: Interview with David Perring from Fosway Group

Rob: In this LAS Insights podcast, I'm talking to David Perring of Fosway Group about how he's seen COVID affect work and learning so far, and where he thinks it's heading in the future.

OK, so today I'm here with the wonderful David Perring, always a joy to speak to. So, thank you for joining me, David. Great to have you here.

David: A great pleasure to be invited as usual, so really looking forward to catching up with you.

Rob: So, first off David, how have you seen COVID affect businesses already?

David: I think the most significant thing, and this is one of the things that came out of our research, is that most organisations have obviously switched to a hybrid working model. Initially, it was simply because we had lockdowns (and we all know what that felt like), but as we transition into this post pandemic world, where the virus is ambient and people are trying to work out what that means for working patterns, we've seen some really interesting reports. There was a great one from the Computer Weekly magazine, of all things, canvassing CIOs (Chief information Officers). They said in their survey that 67% of CIO's were preparing for remote and hybrid working, so people effectively without a fixed, fixed desk point. So that means, to some extent, we're going into this world where you've got this combination of people who are off site and on site, and even when they're on site, they don't have their own desk in a more fluid and more open environment.

We did our own research again through what we call HR Realities. That's been running since the start of the year and we're just wrapping up the

research now. An amazing number of people were going to be looking at working at least one to two days a week in the office and the rest of the time from home. 56%, said they were only going to be in the office one or two days a week. So, I think that's probably going to be one of the most significant disruptions around what it means to be a worker. Now obviously there are people who have to go into their workplace - people in retail and manufacturing and people who are involved in hospitality - they have to be there, but for anybody using the back office, the pressure seems to be to adopt that hybrid working mentality. That's going to have huge impacts on how we think about learning, how we get people together, how we coach and work together as teams in hybrid environments. So again, that's something that I think we haven't quite come to terms with how we do that effectively and out of that starts to spin out other elements of people's working preferences. That's what I'd probably pick out as probably the single biggest disruptor.

Rob: Yeah... and do you think that's going to stick in the kind of three-to-five-year time span that we're looking at?

David: I think what's interesting is that, again, through our own research, is this sense that what's happened has been something that has accelerated what would have happened anyway. That desire for more flexible working and to have a better work life balance, although that's not necessarily guaranteed by remote working because of people's paranoia and desire to always be on, but that sense of sort of having a little bit more flexibility is something that appeals to a significant proportion of the workforce. Equally, there are people who will want to be back in the office, and there's some nice generational references around that. An amazing lady called Doctor Eliza Philby has been doing some work around multi-generational workforce and she's got this great quote along the lines of 'the new entrants into the workforce want to be in the office because they want to learn viscerally from other people and the grey haired and more mature, millennials+ are desperate to be less in the office'. You could end up in this potential world where the kids rule the office three or four days a week and the adults turn up one or two days a week. So again, you get this sense of polarity, of who's in doing what, how do you influence, what are the rules when you get into a virtual room? and actually, Dave is not going to be in the office except for maybe once or twice a month - how do we keep him included in the roundtable discussion that we're having where there's five Gen Zs, a few Gen Xs and some millennials on the call as well who are all sitting remotely. How do we make that work? How do we manage people? How do we help them learn? Interestingly, half of new starters said they'd leave their organisation if they were only ever going to be remote, especially when they're younger employees because they want to be learning and that learning is something that we get through interaction. So, I think we're in for a lot of continuing disruption, but it's that upskilling of people to cope with that new world, which I'm not sure if we've necessarily succeeded in totally at the moment.

Rob: So, what do you think L&D could do to support this this change?

David: I think in some ways it's taking that mentality of accelerating what you've always been doing right, and again from our research that we did, during last year and into this year, we know that everybody - 96% of people - have made changes to their L&D strategy and what they've done, from our research, is increase the adoption of multi-channel learning. We did some benchmarking in 2018 that asked, 'So what do you use when you're rolling out learning in your organisation?' and we asked the same question in 2021 and 21% said that they'd increased their adoption of multi-channel learning. 24% had increased their adoption of on-the-job learning and providing more support on-the-job from when we asked back in 2018. 12% increased helping their learners to develop mastery and expertise and 10% had said they'd increased the support they've given individuals around decisions about what and how they develop. So, I think there's some interesting things that actually, it's not just about switching to virtual classrooms, which is what we saw most people do as their initial reaction, but it's about enabling proper learning cycles that take people from the inputs, enable them to acquire that knowledge, but also enable them to practice. I listened to Donald Clark's podcast on Learning Hacks just two days ago - it's absolutely brilliant. He focuses on the emphasis that we put around learning being all about the inputs, when actually it's in the practice, where most of the genuine learning starts to happen.

Rob: Yeah, yeah.

David: And that's not just the virtual rehearsal, right? So, you can create rich environments in VR and AR to practice in, but it's also just the practice of doing it in work and making sure there's enough human connection to say, how did that go? What do you think you could do better next time? When I saw you do that, these are the skills I thought you could have used to make that more effective, or these are some of the things I thought you could have done to help you improve that transaction next time. I'll invest some time and help coach you to try that, so you can go into almost like a virtual rehearsal. I've seen some great things that people have been doing around capturing themselves on video - maybe doing a pitch, maybe introducing themselves whatever it happens to be, which they can get feedback around.

So, the way that we can open up that layer of practice, whether that's through rehearsing outside of the live environment or in the live environment, and giving people richer feedback, I think that is where most of the opportunity for more effective learning matters, especially when you think about the ongoing deficit around skills and the difficulty that people are finding around hiring people to fit into those roles. There was a CIPD report that said around 40% of organisations were struggling to find

people that they wanted to hire and that was just in the last couple of months - this was like the summer trend. So, the understanding that you do need to invest, not just in supplying people with the knowledge, but actually develop their skills takes us into this sphere of learning through work.

We maybe need to be a bit more programmatic in providing the waypoints that say: 'this is when you need to sit back and just reflect on how that went' because they won't do that naturally, without making space for it. We need to say 'This is the space. This is the time that you're going to use to get some input from somebody else. Who's going to help you? Who's going to give you some feedback. Here's the time - maybe it's a short time around where you're going to get some input, but maybe it's just a bit of resources, not courses, but trying to get into that mindset of how do I make the learning process more human and more supported? Hopefully this help us overcome some of the challenges that we've had with hybrid and remote working, around issues of wellness and wellbeing.

So, being a bit more human centered, I think is one of the key things that you can take away as a L&D professional and not worry about that being that being human delivery, but it's human support and that's peer-to-peer, managers, subject matter experts, and things like that.

Rob: It's fascinating what you say about that in-work practice, because we just habitually design it in. In pretty much everything that we design there's an opportunity to practice that skill, not digitally, but in the real world. The mechanism for getting feedback and coaching on it - well, that's having a good line manager - that's what your line manager should be doing. A lot of the stuff you describe in there isn't things that people need a new fancy bit of technology, or even new skills to design or produce, it's just the act of putting that into the into the learning experience for people.

David: Yeah, yeah and I think it's about finding ways of integrating learning into work and integrating work into learning, right? And again, you don't need to be all whizzy. There are some interesting whizzy things that are coming particularly around AI and skills which seem to be the really accelerating point of the systems market space. So, helping infer what skills I've got from my CV, the length of time that I've worked in particular roles, the sorts of projects I've been involved in, the sorts of feedback and performance reviews that I've had within my organisation. More recently, the associated skills that I may have, that I may not have mentioned in my CV, but people like me tend to talk about those things, even if I didn't think they were important enough to add them to my own. So this sense of inferring skills and then helping to say to 'Hey, if you wanted to move up in the world around here, these are some of the skill areas that you might want to focus on, and they could be technical, interpersonal – I tend to talk about the skills of getting-things-done and the skills of making-things-happen:

those happening skills being more the influencing and interpersonal skills and the getting-things-done skills being a bit more technical. I think that interplay is something that's really important, in terms of AI starting to drive skills into organisations through inference.

The way that work is fragmenting in organisations, and I'm not sure if this is necessarily as a result of the pandemic or has been accelerated by it, is through the creation of more projects and I think we are used to projects in how we work, but also then fragmenting that into gigs, has been something that has been quite significant. What you start to see, in organisations who are more mature in their thinking, is they're starting to say 'OK, if I know what skills people have, I can start to proactively include them, even if they didn't necessarily think that they were a good fit for that job, or that project or that gig. And I can encourage them to participate because I know what their aspirations are, I know what their skills are, so I can encourage them to be involved. For certain demographics who would be maybe less eager to put their hand up, because they feel as though they have to meet the brief before they deploy, the system can start to push them into roles, so you get to this more dynamic and fluid organization where the AI can be a catalyst for conversation and reevaluating people's drivers and thinking about who they are and what they do and then drive skills development out of the back of that.

So, I think there's some really interesting things. It's not about the AI saying, 'oh, this is the course for you'. It's about saying 'this is the development; this is the growth that you can get from working in these sorts of areas. This is the support you can get'. You can also put your hand up and find mentors to help you pursue that, so I think there's some interesting things that are coming through. There's some nice, interesting case studies from the guys at Schneider Electric, Unilever and there's a host of others who are exploring this area as well.

Rob: I guess there's only a few technology players in the market that will be able to offer that because to have that level of data and intelligence for the AI to look at, you kind of need to be using all of their tools for everything you're doing: your internal social networks, your documents, your spreadsheets?

David: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think that's probably true to some extent, but what you're seeing is that there are solutions which are almost picking up the skills responsibility across the entire lifecycle of individual, and they will ingest, and they're more successful when they connect to a wider ecosystem of data, but it's surprising what they can just pick up from your job profiles, your work, your HR profile straight off the bat anyway, because they're referencing some of the AI to use the inferences it's built up from millions of other users, that they've ever come into contact with. So, it does give them that bit of big data insight, but you are right, it's about trying to connect out to a broader set of

data, including work-based data, that's what probably makes a lot of difference, but that's not a prerequisite totally.

There's some interesting players in that space playing around specifically with how we create internal marketplaces for work, be that for gigs roles, but also for mentoring and starting to coach people in 'this is your pathway because these are sort of your aspirations'. They could even look at things like psychometric testing to say these are some of your work or behavioural preferences, so maybe being an accountant wouldn't ignite you around innovation in a way that other roles might.

Rob: Yeah, yeah very good - thank you.

David: So, it's very early days, but people are making a lot of progress already.

Rob: Yeah, yeah. You know, we just need a bit more interoperability, don't we? People being a little bit more open with their APIs and those APIs not costing a fortune if the customer wants to use them, just so that we can start to plumb together these data sources in these systems for the betterment of the organization and the individual.

David: But I think that's.....Yeah, but that's such an important point, right? This sense of ecosystem interconnectedness. There are certain providers on the HR front who don't want to share that data because they want to own it all. They want the power of 1 to wrap everything around their employee experience. There are others who intuitively take a more ecosystem perspective and they're actually inherently more open because they understand that actually sharing knowledge and also ingesting knowledge is the way that actually enriches everybody experience. I think it's a minefield for people to make choices around, but actually you need to start learning now, because the timelines that it takes to get it right aren't necessarily trivial.

Rob: Well, that that may be the answer to my final question, which was if an L&D department were to do just one thing to prepare for this likely future right now, what might that be?

David: Ahhhh.... I can't think of one thing, there's so many. So, I feel as though whatever answer I give, I'm going to be disappointed in it. What I will pick up is an intelligent, digitally-led learner experience. That may sound contradictory to some things I said earlier on that being human, but I think that is what is going to come. And don't see the learning experience as the system, think about it through the persona, the identity, the emotional energy of those individuals, and think what would make them more invested, more energized, more motivated, more passionate, more excited, more refreshed, and more resilient. What journey can deliver that, not just across the little bits of knowledge that we want to package up, but their whole skills growth? And I think if you can dial in learning experience and skills, and think about how we can really enrich that, I think that will really serve you well into

the future. There's a lot of innovation that's happening in that space around what that means for learning in the flow of work, about what that means for blended learning, what it means for better coaching and support, so, that's what I try and say. And I probably sneaked in three or four into one.

Rob: I shall let you get away with that, as always what you share is so very insightful and always makes me think about things that I never would have before.

So, thank you so much David, for joining me today - it's been absolutely brilliant.

For more insights on the impact of COVID on work and learning, head over to www.las-hq.com

Episode 2: Interview with Lori Niles Hofmann and Amanda Nolen from Niles Nolen

Rob: In this LAS Insights COVID podcast, we talked to Lori Niles Hofmann and Amanda Nolen of Niles Nolen about the impact of COVID on work and learning and where they see it heading. Apologies for the audio quality in parts of this podcast -it was recorded remotely.

So, Lori, how have you seen COVID change businesses already?

Lori: So, I think there are the obvious ones, and I won't touch on those because I think we've all seen them, but there's also by-products of those things. Just simply from the nature of this year, a lot of people are now working from home so we're seeing a blend, very much so, between the personal and work. That's also translated into how people want to feel more connected to their work, from an ethical standpoint because those lines are definitely in intersection, so we're seeing a lot of that.

I think notions too of privacy. Because people have a window into your life and they're hearing the dog, or the kids, or people are talking about their health and things like that - there's issues around that.

I think that people are more protective, or maybe they're sharing more and there's different boundaries that are taking place.

The other thing too, that I see that's been very interesting is that introverts have really thrived during COVID. It used to be that when you walk into a meeting, the most extroverted person - the leader - they take a position at the table, and they command. Whereas now that you're just a little square on a Zoom call, or you may be in Slack or Teams, people who need more time to

reflect and contextualize before they respond, they're really excelling in this environment because there is that breathing space for them, and I've found that that very interesting.

Rob: That's fascinating, so it's like a levelling of the playing field, isn't it?

Lori: Exactly exactly.

Rob: So, Amanda, what have you noticed?

Amanda: So, it's interesting what Lori said about questions around ethics and privacy and how the personal and the professional are blending together. I would add to that as well the importance of purpose. So, I think a lot of us have had a lot of time to reflect through this pandemic, about we spend a lot of time at work and so we want to do it with meaning. There's already a lot of talk about the great resignation, I think we really will see a lot of people question 'what is it am doing?' 'what am I giving back to the world?'

In addition to that, I think we're already seeing the effects of the supply chain issues that have been created partly because of COVID, partly because of some other factors. I think that's going to have interesting ramifications when it comes to the workforce and where it's located, bringing a lot of workers back locally rather than globally, or at least a global-local mix which is going to have impacts as well.

If you think of workers as part of a supply chain of talent, we're going to struggle to find the right workers in all the right places. So, the companies that can't get behind remote working, in order to tap into that global workforce are going to struggle. Then the roles that need to be done in place like, for example, lorry drivers in England right now or what have you, there's an opportunity there for reskilling there as well.

Rob: Yeah, very interesting. And looking forward three to five years in the future, which of these changes do you see sticking? Which do you see changing back to how they were? So, Lori, let's go to you first.

Lori: Certainly, so I think the notion of being at home and working remotely, the genie's out of the bottle for that. Anecdotally, I probably can count 20 people who have fled a city core for a better living situation where they have more space and they're not thinking of commuting back. And if they were asked to commute back, they would change jobs, so their companies were willing to accommodate that. I don't think that that's something that's going away.

I do think also that the notion of privacy is going to become quite apparent. I don't think employees are necessarily aware of how much data is actually being collected about them, not just from an L&D standpoint or an HR standpoint. We're also seeing two really nefarious technologies coming out

that monitor employees at home, which I think is absolutely ridiculous. But that idea of what I own and what is private within the confines of my home office versus what is work are going to evolve and I think we'll start to see a GDPR almost of employee data within the context of work.

I also think too (and this was happening pre pandemic has been far more accelerated) is you're going to have a whole cohort of young people who have not necessarily had the luxury of going through a three or four degree by nature of economics due to the pandemic. They've had to step into the workforce, or they've gotten by on micro credentials. I don't see that going away, in fact it is going to accelerate more. We've seen that happen in Covid where people have pivoted out into different roles. Case in point, here in Canada, we are short 180,000 waitstaff or people who are typically in the service industry. However, there was a net creation of 180,000 jobs that are white collar. That's a huge population that re skilled themselves during lockdown, when we were locked down for about 8 months and they moved out of those roles, because they were challenging, minimum wage, unpredictable.... all those things and they simply migrated, based on micro credentials. I think that's going to be quite massive and quite impactful.

Rob: And Amanda, what about you? What do you see sticking? What do you see returning to how it was?

Amanda: Well, I hope that working from home is here to stay myself. I've been doing it for over 20 years, so I'm a huge advocate and believer that it's possible if you do it right. I'd also like to stress the fact that remote working during a pandemic also is not the same as remote working in a normal time and so I understand some companies are hesitant to prolong that possibility, but I really hope to see that stay.

As far as working with purpose - I'd like to point out that I know not everyone has that luxury and there are people that are happy to have whatever employment they can get - but a lot of knowledge workers and others who are really thinking about purpose right now, I do hope that that's a trend that will continue. Maybe also then we'll see more people wanting to be scientists and doctors. And you know, I'm thinking of my adolescents that want to be YouTuber's when they grow up (laughs) – so definitely that purpose - I hope it stays.

Rob: Yeah, that's what we need - more purposeful people that really want what they do to make an overall contribution to our lot as a species, to kind of dig us out of this hole that we're in.

So, now turning to L&D. We've looked at what's happening to work at the moment and what we think will stick in three to five years' time. What do L&D need to do to support these change? Amanda let's start with you this time.

Amanda: Well, obviously there's been an increased adoption of digital technologies, of video. You know, clearly, we are doing a broadcast now, for example. Looking across the generations, across the workforce, nowadays Zoom is a technology that everybody uses. So, I do think that that's going to stick around. However, having said that, video alone and just consuming content alone does not necessarily help you to develop skills. So, over the next few years, I think a lot of the companies that have rushed to implement some of these technologies and solutions, they're going to have a rude awakening when they realize that that's not actually reskilling and upskilling the workforce in the way that we need that to happen, so, looking forward to the next chapter.

Rob: Yeah, definitely. Lori, what do you think?

Lori: I would concur absolutely with everything that Amanda has said. I'd also say two things, following up on what I spoke about earlier about credentials and micro degrees, L&D, particularly to get through the pandemic has been doing a lot of just-in-time things – 'let's just keep the train on the rails and keep going'. We're now going to really need to rethink that approach because we have huge populations that not just need to know how to do their jobs better or learn a portion of the skill, but maybe need to pivot completely. And so that requires really looking at how we right-skill people? That's not a job aid, that's not even a course. It's an entire learning experience mapped over time with different interventions and assessments and feedback loops and coaching and all those things. We need to be thinking more along those lines, rather than how do we put a quick plaster on things to just keep us going. That's something that I think L&D has struggled with. We tend to like to build curricula, but curricula again, if it's done, how it's usually done, it doesn't take into account all of that experience that needs to be layered on top of that, and that's something that L&D really needs to be considering.

Rob: There tends to be a limited flex in curricula as well. They tend to be something that's done and then it stays like that for, however many years and with the pace that the world changes now, well, it can't keep up, so yeah, there does need to be more adaptable approaches.

That links really nicely to the next question - what gaps or opportunities do you see for L&D here? Amanda, we'll start with you again

Amanda: Yeah, I think one of the most important things that L&D should be doing if they're not already, is working much more closely with the talent side of the organization to really try to understand - you know, put your ear to the ground of the business. What are the needs? What are the skills that that we don't have? What are the gaps today and foreseeably what will the gaps be in the near future? I mean, nobody has a crystal ball, but if we do that hard

work to really understand what we are upskilling for, I think that's a good place to start.

Rob: Lori?

Lori: I would also say too that L&D, and I know I sometimes come across as critical, but I do think that L&D really doesn't always keep pace. Not as fast as say our organisations are doing. So, we need to really understand, further to Amanda's point, what gaps there are, but also how the business truly operates. What are they trying to do? What technologies are they using? I really believe too that we'll see in the future what I like to call invisible LMS. Where it becomes a middleware that we don't even see, and the learning is embedded within our Teams or Slack or whatever technologies we're using. But to do that really requires that L&D understands how that work gets done and I'm aware that they don't always get that - I don't just mean technically, but also organically - how things are happening - I think that's a very big opportunity.

I think we also do have to question some of our tropes. Teresa Rose – I'm a big fan of hers – she pointed out - are pathways the new courses? And I think that's a really astute point. How are we really thinking about from farm to table? How does a person really get upskilled in something? And how do we engineer that for them? I think that's really exciting, but it's going to be very unique. An example I use is that somebody has done level 4 Spanish - when they log into Excel the next time it says, do you want to change your language settings to Spanish - it's that type of thinking.

Rob: Yeah, so some quite substantial changes there for L&D - working more in the talent space and working with people that are already there and really stepping up to understand how business is really done and the data side. What would you say is the easy first step that an L&D department could take now to put them on that road? So, Lori we'll come to you first.

Lori: I would say observe more and control less. A really good example I saw with one of our clients, a major pharmaceutical company, is that before Covid their L&D department was originally, before Covid, was planning towards rolling out Teams by October 2020. So, this is February - they were building courses, job aids, working with Microsoft - it was, you know, all this slow rollout. Covid hit, I think it was March 20th that they just turned-on Teams for everyone and... it worked. People were able to use it and yes, they ended up having to do some refits and they had to do some targeted training based on where people were stumbling and where they weren't seeing usage, but overall, it did work.

Now I don't want every project for L&D to be like that. That was a very drastic way. But I think sometimes we have to appreciate that we're not going to stay ahead of all the skills that are out there and all the ways that

people are learning. Instead, we should be looking to see what's already happening organically, what can we harness and what can we do to direct, rather than command and control? And I think that's where we tend to fall apart.

And of course, I would be remiss if didn't say that it also too ultimately comes down to looking at the data and understanding what data is available that tells us what people are actually doing and what is effective and how? How do we harness that?

Rob: It's interesting that it's kind of treating our employees and our learners as adults with brains, rather than this spoon-feeding form of learning – ‘we ‘re the training people, we know how best you learn. Let me spoon feed these things to you’. I think it's just not very helpful to people and then we complain that actually what we want is a learning culture where people are self-directed, but we've taught them the complete opposite behaviour over decades, haven't we?

Lori: Completely agree. I would even go one step further. It's not just that they're adults, they're our colleagues and friends. So, if I wouldn't sit in a pub and talk to a person like a teacher, by explaining something to them, why do I do that in a in a learning setting when really it doesn't make sense?

Rob: Yeah, absolutely. How about you Amanda? What do you think is an easy first step that L&D departments could take?

Amanda: You know to Lori's point, don't boil the ocean - you just have to start somewhere and if you overthink it and over engineer it, especially when you think about things like skills frameworks that companies can spend years putting that together and by the time they do, guess what, the needs have moved on.

So, pick something where you know there's a true need. Make sure that you have the answer to the question ‘what for?’ from a business perspective and from the employee's perspective as well. If you can answer that question and you have a use case, just dive in - you can always iterate later.

Rob: Wonderful! It's always such a pleasure speaking to you both. The level of insight that you bring is always really eye-opening for me. I always learn so much speaking to you both. So, thank you so much for being part of LAS insights, you've both been great – thank you!

So, for more insights on the impact of COVID on work and learning, head over to www.las-hq.com