Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Workforce Development

Successes, Challenges, and Lessons Learned

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OVERVIEW

Federal Management Partners, Inc. (FMP Consulting) is a woman-owned small business (WOSB) strategic management and human capital consulting firm with 30 years of experience working with Federal Government agencies, state and local government, private sector companies, nonprofits, and associations. Our Learning and Development Center of Excellence focuses on learning strategy development; training design, development, and delivery; and learning program evaluation. In 2020, we worked with our clients to adapt their workforce development programs as the COVID-19 pandemic had significant impacts on their ability to deliver training. In February 2021, we asked 30 respondents how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their organization's workforce development. This whitepaper discusses the results of that survey, along with our own observations and lessons learned through FMP's work with our clients.

> Since March 2020, FMP has **converted over 620 hours** of instructor-led training (ILT) to virtual instructor-led training (VILT) across more than **64 courses and 15 clients**. FMP has also facilitated more than 85 VILT courses, totaling **more than 1,270 instructional hours**.

SURVEY DETAILS

Our survey asked the following six questions:

1. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, how did your organization conduct training?
   a. Primarily in-person
   b. Mostly in-person, with some virtual
   c. An even mix of in-person and virtual
   d. Mostly virtual, with some in-person
   e. Primarily virtual
2. Which of the following describe your organization's training since the start of the pandemic (select all that apply)?
   a. Reduce live training offerings
   b. Shifted in-person live training to virtual delivery
   c. Converted training to pre-developed self-paced training (e.g., web-based training)
   d. Stopped all live training until the pandemic is over
3. What has been your biggest training success since the pandemic?
4. What has been your biggest training challenge since the pandemic?
5. When it is safe to return to the office, how do you expect your organization to conduct training moving forward?
   a. See Question #1 for answer options
6. Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic will have any lasting impacts on how your organization conducts training moving forward? If so, what are those impacts?
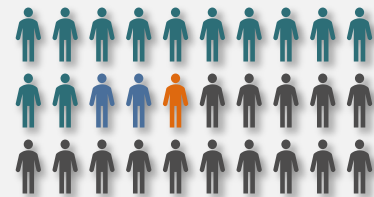
FMP received **30 responses to our survey**, which included 10 of our current clients and 20 responses through our social media channels.

12 respondents were from non-Department of Defense (DoD) agencies within the Federal Government, two were from the DoD, and one was from State Government. Finally, we had 15 responses from private industry.
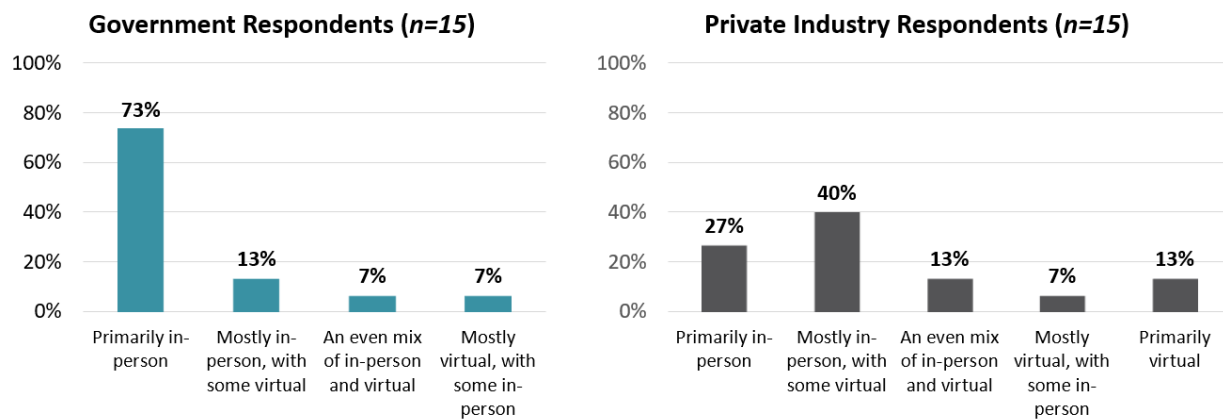
SURVEY RESULTS

TRAINING PRIOR TO THE PANDEMIC

77%
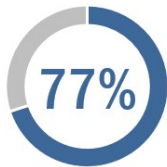
77% of all respondents indicated that, prior to the pandemic, training was conducted primarily or mostly in person.

Responses varied greatly between Government and private industry, with Government respondents having a much heavier reliance on in-person training in the pre-pandemic environment compared to private industry.

Government Respondents (*n=15*)

Primarily in-person	**73%**
Mostly in-person, with some virtual	**13%**
An even mix of in-person and virtual	**7%**
Mostly virtual, with some in-person	**7%**

Private Industry Respondents (*n=15*)

Primarily in-person	**27%**
Mostly in-person, with some virtual	**40%**
An even mix of in-person and virtual	**13%**
Mostly virtual, with some in-person	**7%**
Primarily virtual	**13%**

While 73% of Government respondents answered that their workforce training was conducted primarily in person, only 27% of industry respondents answered the same. Also note that none of the Government respondents indicated that their training was primarily conducted virtually.

IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC

The most common response to the pandemic was to shift in-person live training to virtual live training, which 70% of respondents reported. One-third (33%) converted at least some of their training to self-paced asynchronous training. One-fifth (20%) reduced live training offerings, and 13% stopped any form of live training, with some falling into the 33% who converted live training to asynchronous training.

70%
Shifted in-person live training to virtual live delivery

33%
Converted training to pre-developed self-paced training (e.g., web-based training)

20%
Reduced live training offerings

13%
Stopped all live training until the pandemic is over

LARGEST SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

One of the **largest successes** we heard about from the survey, and saw through our own experiences with our clients, is that many organizations **successfully made the transition to virtual training delivery**. Their certification and pipeline training continued on schedule and they became more reliant on just-in-time and on-demand training. Some of the respondents saw increased attendance at virtual events, and saw **reduced training costs** when travel was eliminated. With the increase in virtual delivery, the pandemic forced organizations to **implement better software** that allowed them to effectively conduct virtual training.

Among the **largest challenges** we heard about was the struggle to make virtual training engaging. Many also mentioned that the informal interactions that used to take place on breaks, between sessions, and at lunch no longer happened because everyone just walked away from their computers. Others talked about **learners being distracted by other activities** while attending or participating in the training. With in-person delivery, learners are forced to be away from their computers and email and cannot take phone calls during training. In the virtual environment, it is very easy to multi-task during training sessions when you are already in front of your computer. We found that **session lengths needed to be reduced to account for virtual delivery**—participants cannot stay engaged virtually in front of a screen for eight hours in a day. And finally, there were technology challenges noted, both with learning how to use virtual platforms effectively, and with **limitations such as bandwidth and software and audio issues**.

Successes

"Creating a virtual onboarding experience which also enables networking."

"Due to moving trainings virtual, it has allowed greater access to share knowledge within our network. Trainings have become available globally rather than by office or regional."

"Break out groups and individualized learning."

Challenges

"Government IT support and end-user training on virtual platforms."

"Ensuring that people stay engaged and are not involved in other activities. Not because they are disliking our training but because they get pulled into other things."
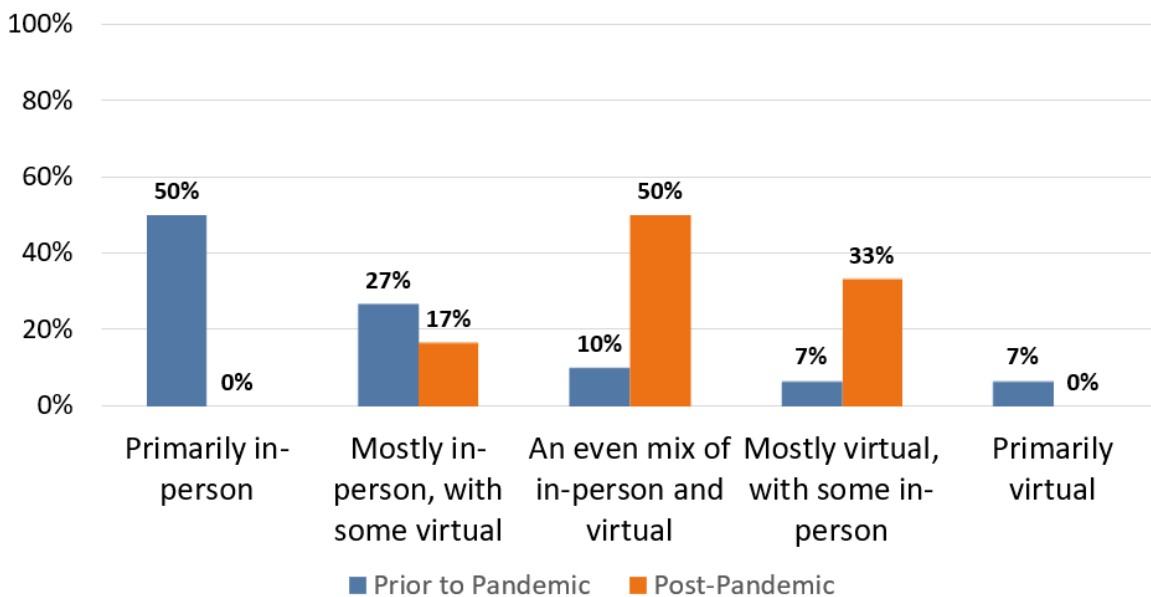
"Sharing of more informal knowledge which is more easily passed around through in-person engagements."

PREDICTED IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

83%
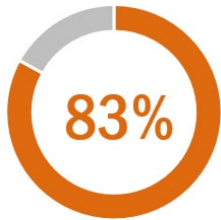
83% of all respondents predicted that training will be at least 50% virtual moving forward.

No respondents believed that their organization would go back to primarily in-person training after the pandemic. Interestingly, the same was true of primarily virtual training. It appears that the pandemic highlighted both the benefits of virtual learning, but also the benefits of conducting at least some training in person.

	Primarily in-person	Mostly in-person, with some virtual	An even mix of in-person and virtual	Mostly virtual, with some in-person	Primarily virtual
Prior to Pandemic	50%	27%	10%	7%	7%
Post-Pandemic	0%	17%	50%	33%	0%

> "We have received a crash course in virtual work and training due to the pandemic and I believe this lesson will stay with us and prompt significantly more virtual work and training in the immediate future."

> "We will very likely have a larger number of full-time remote employees, which was unthinkable before."

> "I think in the future it will not be justifiable to fly to a client, stay in a hotel, and incur all of these costs for a training session."

CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

It is clear from both our survey responses and our work with our clients that virtual learning is here to stay. Therefore, it is important that organizations adjust their workforce development plans to accommodate various considerations for virtual training:

Budget

While virtual instructor-led training (VILT) sessions are typically more expensive to facilitate due to the need for technical support in addition to an instructor, significant time and money is saved by participants because no travel or time away from their desks is required. Given the much higher ratio of participants to instructors, **VILT sessions typically have a net overall cost savings** for each delivery, compared to in-person instructor-led training, with a similar up-front cost to develop the training materials.

On-demand virtual training, like eLearning courses, are typically more expensive to create per seat hour than instructor-led training. However, they have no per-student or per-delivery costs, and no size limitations. Therefore, **training budgets may need to be increased up front**, but the recurring costs are significantly reduced once the trainings are developed.

Technology

As virtual training becomes more prevalent, organizations must both **consider and plan for student and instructor comfort levels with technology**. We have found that instructors used to teaching in a classroom can be very uncomfortable using a virtual training platform for the first time. It has been critical to conduct train-the-trainer sessions to help them become familiar with the virtual tools. Additionally, it is a best practice to **provide a technical support person** (a.k.a., "producer") to help facilitate the virtual sessions. The producer will help participants get connected, troubleshoot audio issues, and assist the instructor with breakout rooms, polls, and other activities. Finally, we have found that students can also be intimidated by the virtual platforms. We have developed **technical help guides for the participants** that are distributed before the training events and cover commonly asked questions and troubleshooting tips.

Learning Experience

Even if virtual learning does not entirely replace in-person instruction, it is clear that in-person instructional time may be at a premium moving forward. Additionally, it is a best practice to keep virtual live sessions to no more than two hours at a time, and no more than four to five hours in a day. For these two reasons, it will be more important than ever for organizations to **consider blended learning approaches** that combine instructor-led delivery with self-paced online learning. For example, is there content that can be removed from the classroom instruction and presented to learners in the form of an eLearning course or instructional video that they complete prior to the classroom instruction? This will allow the live (virtual or in-person) instructor-led sessions to focus on participant discussion, working through case studies, or small group activities, rather than lecture.

Given the challenges many of our survey respondents indicated around distractions that happen during VILT sessions, it may also be important to **consider setting ground rules for virtual sessions**. For example, require all participants to log out of their email during training and ask them to silence their phones so they are not distracted.

Finally, as the workforce becomes more distributed, it will be important for organizations to **leverage the features of their learning management systems** (LMS) to help facilitate learner engagement with virtual content. While these features vary by system, some examples include learning recommendations based on learner history and selected topics of interest, discussion forums, communities of practice, and leaderboards and badges that learners can earn by interacting with content.

Interested in learning more? FMP's Learning and Development (L&D) Center of Excellence can help you evaluate your organization's training offerings, select the delivery methods best suited for your needs, and provide training design, development, and delivery support.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amanda Palla is a Managing Consultant with more than 16 years of experience in the L&D space. Amanda leads FMP's L&D Center of Excellence; her experience includes the design, development, and management of instructor-led training, web-based training, mobile performance support apps, and virtual and mixed reality training solutions. She holds a Master's degree in Education and is a certified Project Management Professional (PMP). Amanda can be reached at apalla@fmpconsulting.com.

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