

Youth, Covid-19 and learning in the workplace

By [Andrew van Zyl](#)

17 Jun 2020

For young South African graduates learning their professions in the workplace, the Covid-19 lockdown has been a serious set-back to their experiential learning.



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While the country is hopefully soon to work its way to lockdown levels two and one, the restrictions on interaction with colleagues and practical site visits will continue to make mentoring difficult. It is also evident that Covid-19 will be constraining our working habits for some time, particularly where mentors are in higher risk groups.

Working remotely is likely to become more common among professionals. It is much easier, though, for an experienced engineer to apply their existing knowledge from a remote location, than it is for a young graduate to learn how to do something new from a distance.

Value of workplace experience

Covid-19 is also likely to reduce the profitability of a range of businesses, as economic growth levels drop globally. This may undermine our ability to fund innovative alternatives to the conventional, co-located working environment. The value of workplace experience cannot be underestimated. Indeed, most professions make this a compulsory element of the learning process. It is required that skills and insights are passed on from those with more experience to those with theoretical knowledge – who now need to apply it.

We need to be asking ourselves how we will continue to transfer these practical skills to young people when the working environment demands that we do not work in proximity. Also, how do we ensure that young people get enough access to real-life work-sites and first-hand experience of seeing expert problem-solving to learn the practice of applying their skills?

Fortunately, the move from a Level 4 to a Level 3 lockdown is allowing an opening up of many sectors where practical learning on site is vital. These include mining, construction and manufacturing. But even in the post-lockdown era, the amount of close contact in our working relationships will almost certainly be curtailed for years or until a vaccine has been developed or progress on treating severe illness has been made.



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Learning opportunities constrained

Unplanned interactions and unscheduled discussions between colleagues are great for learning, but these will be constrained. Older, more experienced staff – those in the Covid-19 high-risk zone – are likely to spend more time working from home. Even among office-based staff, there will be regulated avoidance of communal spaces.

This means we will need to be innovative in how we interact. For those businesses fortunate to have access to outside

areas, these will probably be deemed safer for physical interaction than indoor spaces. We will need to get better at our online engagements – so that they feel more natural and allow more nuanced and organic engagement. This might mean more creative use of cameras, monitors and other digital technologies.

As a consulting firm, we are already focusing considerable effort on finding the most effective ways of communicating and interacting with clients and with each other. These methods must address a range of forum styles – from meetings to conferences – and allow sharing of sometimes complex content, data and images, not to mention body language.



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Recognising the opportunities

We should also recognise the opportunities in this challenging new environment. For instance, not everyone is comfortable with a mass-scale, lecture-hall type of learning. Many prefer to work at their own pace, and appreciate the ability to return to delivered content for another hearing. As we pioneer the use of remote or virtual technologies, we are discovering that many interactions actually work better online. These are likely to stay in place even after the opportunity for face-to-face contact returns.

Dealing with the pandemic has also been an opportunity to re-assess our previously unquestioned 'cultural' practices in the workplace. From working hours to dress codes, a wide range of assumptions are now under review. It is important that we ensure that we capture lessons learned during this time and use them to grow and improve.

Our response could include a re-thinking of how young people progress – formally and informally – through the workplace. Ideally, this would support the transformation visions to which many businesses have already committed themselves – and would address issues of age, ethnicity and gender among others.

If the youth are looking for motivators and enablers of constructive workplace evolution, the Covid-19 pandemic could be giving us some precious opportunities to reassess the space we work in and how we interact and learn.

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