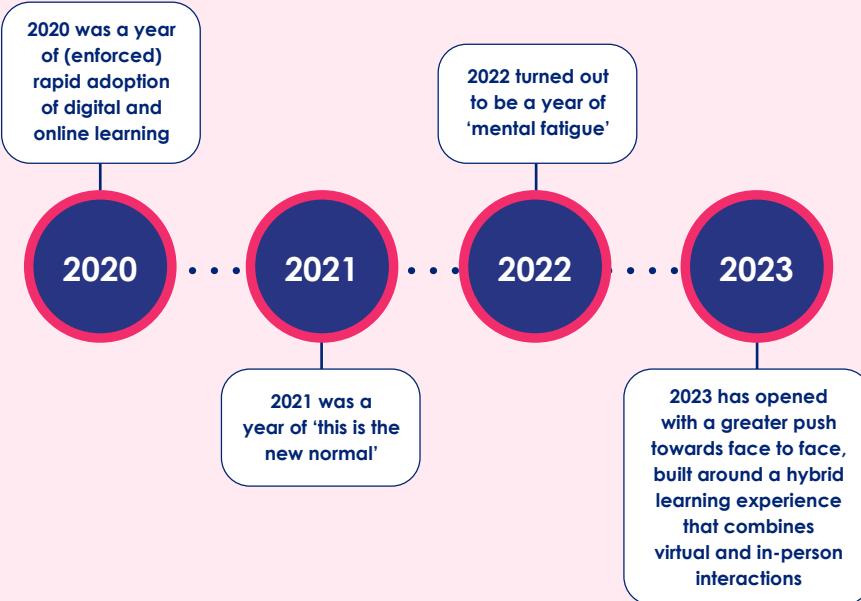# GLOBAL HR EXECUTIVE AND ALPHA DEVELOPMENT ROUNDTABLE REPORT

Creating Healthy
Learning Environments that
Engage Employees

At a recent virtual roundtable convened by HR Leadership Exchange, HR leaders in the finance sector explored a broad range of employee engagement challenges, many of which had arisen as a result of the global Covid-19 pandemic.

THE COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE WAS CHARACTERIZED THUS:

2020 was a year of (enforced) rapid adoption of digital and online learning

2022 turned out to be a year of 'mental fatigue'

2020 ··· **2021** ··· **2022** ··· **2023**

2021 was a year of 'this is the new normal'

2023 has opened with a greater push towards face to face, built around a hybrid learning experience that combines virtual and in-person interactions

FLEXIBILITY IS KEY

The pandemic pushed everyone in the cohort into online virtual learning environments. For some this was an extension of activities they were already undertaking, while for others it was a revolutionary step, establishing a welcome baseline of competence in virtual learning. With lockdowns now a fading memory, delegates agreed that a flexible approach is key to the next phase of Learning & Development, where virtual engagements are enhanced by one-on-ones, and larger face-to-face team events.

Communicating sensitively with employees is also going to be crucial for engagement as new ways of working are established. As one leader in the insurance field said: "Now that there is a move back to in-office working, our training environment will remain the same because most of our trainers are remote from our satellite offices. But we are mindful of employee engagement as we make plans to move to a hybrid way of working."

There was common agreement that socializing learning was crucial. An L&D leader spoke of the importance of social components within learning and referred to a social initiative based around a "Community of Practice."

> A flexible approach is key to the next phase of Learning & Development, where virtual engagements are enhanced by one-on-ones, and larger face-to-face team events.
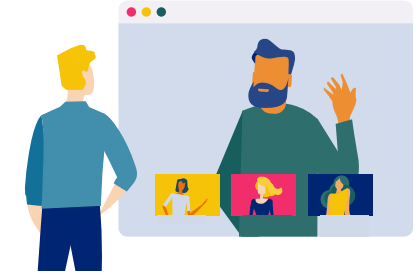
"We run a six-month Technology and Innovation program with a geographically dispersed team, and it includes a mix of components, from bite-size virtual training to larger watch-parties in-office, to one-on-ones with senior leaders." This Community of Practice brings together people with similar skillsets or common content interests, supplemented by larger face-to face-gatherings which many find rewarding. Using this social community encourages practitioners to share, train and teach others in the network – helping everyone to stay engaged.

"We then meet 'with purpose' to keep the engagement going. At the end of the six-month program, graduates will then take on new roles and be a part of that ongoing pipeline of technologists and innovators," the speaker concluded.

A NEW ERA OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Many spoke of their experiences encouraging greater involvement in – and accountability for – skills development and employee engagement among senior management. One leader in the finance field said: "We're trying to bridge the engagement gap by involving managers in conversations with their direct reports about skills development. We're encouraging them to set aside 20-30 minutes a week to have developmental conversations with their teams without 'talking shop'." L&D professionals support them with materials, but the result is more leadership engagement from those that know the most about the skills and competencies that the organization needs.

There was a note of caution sounded, however, around the impact on accountability of leadership approaches and styles. Some felt that they still needed to work hard to encourage business leaders to recognize that time away from work can actually be time well spent on development. Many found that 'nudges' worked well. These are regular monthly emails that provide follow-ups for participants on courses encouraging them to put into practice what they've learned. Managers are also nudged and encouraged to support their teams in applying what they've learned into their day-to-day activities.

> Managers are also nudged and encouraged to support their teams in applying what they've learned into their day-to-day activities.

"ORGANIC IS BEST"

All participants agreed that a major goal was to encourage people to feel 'excited' to participate in an organization's learning programs, whether virtual, face-to-face or hybrid.

One senior leader from the finance sector talked about the importance of promoting this organically, and explained how the organization's new hybrid working policy was based around the concept of "Presence with Purpose." "Now we are emerging from the pandemic, our people come into the office for purposeful events. Hybrid learning is one of these purposeful events and employees are feeling empowered to travel in, to engage with their colleagues and to learn face-to-face."

> "Presence with Purpose" creates a culture where, when your people turn up, they really turn up.

By offering a combination of blended learning, hybrid and in-person learning, the organization has seen an increase in engagement around learning within their organization. "Presence with Purpose" creates a culture where, when your people turn up, they really turn up.

As a by-product of virtual learning, a more social and collaborative learning culture is created, especially because people from different locations are present in the same training sessions. "When people come into the office, they are excited to be there. It's a great way to bring purpose back to the in-office experience."

ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE THROUGH "THINK TANKS"

There was agreement that learning programs can be extremely useful in creating an internal 'think tank', which can lead to positive organizational change. It also creates a sense of empowerment and engagement for those whose contributions are being recognized. One HR leader runs Emerging Leader programs where, as well as dedicated training topics, including self-exploration, conflict resolution, and leadership skills, participants must also come up with an idea for an organizational change. "This idea is then explored with executive stakeholders, and ultimately presented to senior staff on why they should adopt their idea. It's also beneficial to us as an organization as a lot of really good ideas come out of it."

MEASURE IT TO IMPROVE IT

> Satisfaction is an overly-used metric that doesn't necessarily help to assess whether change happens over time.

Measuring success is crucial, but knowing what success looks like – and how you know when you've found it – requires a considered approach. This means aligning the business strategy – and corporate objectives and goals – to any such measurement, along with whatever competencies, skills, attitudes, and motivations are needed to achieve it.

Delegates agreed that satisfaction is an overly-used metric that doesn't necessarily help to assess whether change happens over time – in particular, around changing behaviours. One participant from the insurance sector summed it up thus: "One week later, three weeks later, six months later, are they still applying their learning, and is their behavior actually changing?"

HARNESSING ALUMNI

> We should all ask ourselves what we're doing with alumni from our programs!

Alumni were felt to be crucial to the success of learning programs. Some organizations felt they were harnessing them well, while others felt that alumni were an opportunity to promptly be explored.

As one member of the Finance community stated: "We should all ask ourselves what we're doing with alumni from our programs! It's important to stay engaged with them afterwards." For some, alumni were an essential way to signal to new participants on courses that they themselves would be expected to contribute beyond the life of the course itself. One said: "I'm asking myself what we do from an alumni perspective, and I don't think we do a lot. I think we send people through the program and give them the skills and then wait for the opportunity to become available. I'm now going to be asking what we need to do with our alumni!"

ENCOURAGING SELF-LEARNING

Attitudes to what constitutes an 'acceptable course' are changing. Some organizations have found it beneficial to expand the range of courses they will pay for to include technical and soft skills that wouldn't normally be included in 'traditional' learning courses.

> The organization puts the emphasis back on to the employee to see where they want to grow.

One VP from the banking sector shared that they are encouraging employees to evaluate their own capabilities and identify the next steps in their own learning agenda – particularly on digitization and digital skills. "Anyone can request to do any course that they find, and their managers approve whether it is relevant to their growth. If it is, we then fund it." In this way, the organization puts the emphasis back on to the employee to see where they want to grow. "We're widening what we would consider paying for, whether it's technical or soft skills training, outside of what we would normally provide."

CONCLUSION

An unintended consequence of the move to online learning brought about by the global pandemic has been an increase in opportunities for collaboration across geographically dispersed organizations. And even as the return to the office continues, hybrid ways of learning will continue to be embraced, with even more opportunities for collaborative learning and better internal networking. Looking ahead, organizations would do well to:

1. Create Communities of Practice in your organization. By exploiting social components on virtual learning platforms and combining these with one-to-one and in-person events, communities of interest around skillsets or content areas can create significant engagement and strengthen the organizational 'glue.'

2. Find ways to make learning more 'purposeful' within your employee value proposition. As hybrid working practices take hold, encouraging learning to be regarded as a 'purposeful' activity will help foster 'organic' engagement, rather than 'prescribed' engagement.

3. Explore the role of alumni in promoting a learning culture. By encouraging alumni to continue participating in learning events and programs, learning can be cemented and engagement improved year-on-year.

If you have found this report of interest and would like to be included in future Alpha events, please get in touch via our **website** where you can also find out more about us and our capabilities in developing comprehensive Learning & Development programs for financial services organizations around the world.

SPEAK WITH US TODAY TO LEARN HOW TO OVERCOME YOUR ORGANIZATION'S SKILLS GAP AND ACCELERATE TIME TO PRODUCTIVITY.

We'll share the latest insights and methodologies about how we bridge the skills gap and speed up capability and time to productivity across divert career talent pools, as well as this, you can find out more about our expertise in developing comprehensive Learning & Development programs for financial services organizations around the world.

About Alpha

Founded in 2003, Alpha is a specialist Early Careers, Sales, Management & Leadership training provider for blue-chip financial services institutions (including the world's top Investment Banks). Alpha's USP is its ability to design and deliver complex global training programs at scale, with insightful content and a partnership approach to driving value for its customers.

641 Lexington Avenue, 15th Floor, New York, NY 10022

alphadevelopment.com