Covid-19 and the future of Executive Education

In our last article we wrote about the crisis facing universities. In this article, we want to turn our attention to one particular branch of learning, executive education.

In many respects, the very best executive education has a strong element of performance to it and, to be clear, we do not mean that pejoratively. Executive education is about engaging a senior executive audience (many of whom may have had no experience of education for many years) and getting them to understand new concepts, methods and ways of leading and then actually to adopt them and change their behaviour. To do this is not easy. The most successful educators have to be adept at being both:

- Deeply knowledgeable of their material and able to link it to the experience of their audience drawing out the relevance of these new ideas to them; and

- Able to capture and hold the attention of busy, and often sceptical, executives who are already successful within their own frame of reference and already have a full agenda to attend to

Just being knowledgeable but unable to transmit knowledge successfully will quickly have an educator marked by their audience as a bore. On the other hand, just being able to perform with no hinterland of knowledge and relevant experience will mean an educator is quickly found out as having nothing useful to offer.

Executive education really encompasses two very different streams of activity:

- **Stream 1**: What can, perhaps, best be described as technical instruction – i.e. providing traditional education in methods, models, and ways of doing things;

- **Stream 2**: The development of the individual to be a better leader and custodian of the organisation. This frequently involves fundamental change in attitudes, behaviour, values and the individual's and organisation's purpose.

Successful Stream 2 executive education goes well beyond traditional learning and development. It is more like an exercise in transformational change applied at the individual level. In our experience, this means that the very best Stream 2 education is not just another piece of learning and development transmitted from an active educator to a passive audience but a genuine collaboration between educators and the executives they are working with. As such, it should be seen as part of the broader activity of strategy and organisational development and not owned solely by L&D. In our experience, this means that the very best Stream 2 education is led not just from within L&D but by a genuine collaboration between L&D and the most senior executives of the organisation.

In the current environment, almost all executive education has, understandably, stalled. Many of its clients have either cancelled or rescheduled planned sessions until the crisis has passed. A few have tried to redesign sessions and get them delivered by non-traditional means. At one level this is a good thing. As we discussed in our earlier article on what Covid-19 teaches us about change management, the pandemic has compelled providers to make changes in the space of weeks that have either been occurring slowly over the past few years or not occurring at all. In common with what has happened in other sectors, the crisis has forced providers to explore alternative modes of delivery (something the industry has been exploring for some time) and has speeded up the move to online delivery.

Overall, the experience has, so far, been surprisingly successful. Providers and their customers have discovered that, although far from perfect, technological solutions can be made to work for many aspects of executive education. So, for now, some delivery has remained possible. However, talking to senior executives in the field, it is clear that whilst online, virtual delivery works well for Stream 1 education in technical subjects it does not, as yet, work quite so well for Stream 2 or, more generally, for any of the soft skills element of executive education.

When it comes to Stream 2, the very best executive education has long made use of an approach known as immersive experiential learning, namely learning through reflection on doing. This mode of learning entails a hands-on approach. It is no longer about the teacher at the front of the room (the "sage on the stage") imparting their knowledge to students. Immersive learning places those being trained in a simulation of a real experience and it has been shown to be the most effective way of embedding new skills, understanding and behaviour in senior executives. While the global lockdown has been in force, bringing people together for such immersion has been impossible.

We expect the push to move Stream 1 education online will continue with increasing rapidity: there will be no return to the status quo ante. And for all that in-person immersive experiential learning is the gold standard, the crisis has brought home to clients and providers alike the advantages to going online for Stream 2 as well. As such, we expect on-line provision will increasingly be a part of the executive education mix.

What are these advantages? Basically, there are four:

- **Cost**: in reality, for executive education, the cost of gathering everyone together typically far exceeds the cost of education. Added together, transport, hotel rooms, plenary and breakout rooms, food and even the opportunity cost of delegates' time while travelling far exceeds the cost of providing the cadre of educators needed to deliver a programme. Switching to online delivery therefore offers an immediate and compelling cost incentive;

- **Speed**: Typically, the bottleneck that delays programmes being delivered comes not from the design and preparation of a programme but from the logistics of gathering all the participants in one place and time. Getting time in diaries, booking flights, scheduling executive speakers and guests, applying for visas all slow down the delivery of programmes. Online delivery immediately makes things faster and easier;

- **Access**: A big struggle faced by organisations is the democratisation of learning. Here we enter a classic change conundrum – how do you successfully cascade a new way of doing things (behaviours, values, strategy) through an organisation if your interventions are only touching the most senior executives and if you can only touch a limited number at any one time? The cost impact of going online coupled with the ability to engage with much larger audiences for any single event make staying with some form of online delivery compellingly attractive for organisations;

- **Asynchronous/on demand delivery**: Once the move has been made to online delivery, it is a small step to recording material and making it possible for people to access much of what they need when they need it rather than being locked in to a specific event (certainly for Stream 1 and, arguably for much of the traditional classroom component of Stream 2). This helps with both access and usefulness. Imagine if you could access learning precisely at the point when you need it rather than weeks or months before you will be using it?

The positive impact of online delivery – a case study

To demonstrate the power of going online and the way in which it changes access to content, take an example not from executive education but from a university.

As a response to the current crisis, The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania developed a course for students titled "***Epidemics, Natural Disasters, Geopolitics: Managing Uncertainty***".

A course that would typically take many weeks to design and prepare was put together in three days using multiple members of Faculty and was then offered online to Wharton undergraduate, MBA, Executive MBA and then, ultimately, all Penn Students.

More than 2,500 students signed up to take the course, a number that would have been quite impossible to enrol in a programme delivered in the traditional way.

If the case to move Stream 1 online is compelling, the case of Stream 2 is much more complex. Even with the best that modern technology can provide, there are still some experiences and learning that cannot be replicated without the richness of experience provided by face-to-face group learning. Of course, technology can now go some way towards replicating an immersive experience: online spaces for online teams (coupled with virtual breakout rooms for them to work in) are all technologically possible and virtual reality has real promise for the future (and not a far distant future either). But these technological solutions do not perfectly recreate the visceral experience of being physically together and learning from a fully immersive experience. For this reason, we expect that, for Stream 2, when it is possible to do so safely, sophisticated users of executive education will return to an element of traditional face-to-face delivery, certainly for their most senior executives/leadership cadres.

If this is true it presents two distinct challenges:

- What conditions need to exist for it to be safe for delegates and educators to gather once more?

- What will be the new mix? Can or will Stream 2 education revert to traditional face-to-face approaches or will blended multi-mode learning (a mix of online, pre-work and face-to-face) be the new norm?

With regards preconditions, face-to-face executive education faces the same challenge as other forms of in-person assembly. While a concerted effort is taking place to lift the lockdown across wide areas of the economy, assembly is, for the foreseeable future, fraught with dangers and the legal minefields that flow from them. Until or unless a medical breakthrough is made in the treatment or prevention of Covid-19, we cannot return to the world of close-up, face-to-face encounters that was so familiar to us until very recently. Given all the risks, it will take a lot for delegates and educators to be willing to travel *for work* as they did in the pre-pandemic era. And even where the willingness is there, the restrictions on movements between countries will hamper their ability to do so.

For now, we hypothesise that, instead of gathering together delegates from around the globe in one event, an alternative model could be of smaller, regional events (in regions that have established recognised travel rights between countries). Only the presenters would travel to that event. Presenters would need either to quarantine until deemed non-infectious or to be able to demonstrate that they have the antibodies to the virus and are therefore non-infectious. Although this is, undoubtedly, a possible theoretical model, we think it unlikely to occur to any significant degree.

Sooner or later, this will pass and by, say, sometime in 2021 a level of normality will have returned. However, even then we predict that the way in which Stream 2 education is delivered will be fundamentally different from the way it was delivered in the past. As we have said, Covid-19 has acted as an accelerator to changes that were already occurring within this industry (and many others). The four advantages of moving to online delivery we cited earlier are too powerful to be ignored.

On the assumption that organisations re-engage in Stream 2 learning for their executives, we would expect each session of a planned programme's "real estate" (i.e. the time that delegates are expected to be learning) to be subject to critical challenge along the lines of:

- What is the real objective of this piece of learning and could these objectives be achieved satisfactorily:
    - Offline: as pre-work or individual reading,
    - Online: remotely in advance of the programme

In consequence, we regard it as inevitable that there will be a marked increase in a blended learning approach, in the form of an element of online learning combined possibly with off-line pre-work. This will become a permanent component of Stream 2 executive education with executives gathered together for as little time as possible and only for the essential face-to-face immersive component of programmes.

Two notes of caution attach to our hypothesis:

- A frequent intangible benefit of both Streams (especially Stream 2) is the opportunity to develop a strong network with a peer group of like-minded individuals (either within an organisation for in-house programmes, or across organisations for open ones). Time and again, delegates cite in-person networking as one of the most valuable things they get out of executive education. We are not surprised by this: senior executives rarely have enough time to talk to others and make the sort of connection they are able to in a well-designed and delivered Stream 2 event. One of the Authors (Adam) has frequent experience of delegates commenting with surprise, "*Until I came on this programme, I thought I was the only person with this problem, now I discover I am not alone*". To restrict the face-to-face component too much runs the risk of losing the opportunities for such connections;

- Executive education is seen by many as a luxury good in that its perceived value to some delegates is related not to its utility but to its scarcity or prestige. As such, the demand for such events to be held offsite, to be exclusive in composition and availability, and to include travel to an exotic location is part of the perceived value of the experience. It is, for example, no accident that Las Vegas is one of the most common destinations of "business travel" in the US!

In light of this, we predict that there will be some pushback from would-be senior executive delegates to this new way of delivering Stream 2 education. Given, however, the overwhelming cost and efficiency advantages of this new approach, there seems to us no doubt this is the way the industry will go. Providers need to be investing in the technology platforms necessary to support it and educators need to be preparing for this new way of delivery.

We cannot finish without one final thought and word of warning. The transition to increasing offline and asynchronous online learning does require a level of systems sophistication and discipline on the part of both organisations and delegates. We are sure the authors cannot be alone in having the experience of running programmes with pre-work as an essential prerequisite only to discover that several delegates turn up to the face-to-face component either with no knowledge that it was required or having not done it on the grounds that they

did not regards it as important. Sadly, this seems to become increasingly common the higher up an organisation's hierarchy the delegate population come from. If organisations are to truly profit from this new blended environment, the journey will not be without its challenges.

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