EDITORIAL

We need to learn how to love digital learning 'again': European SMEs response to Covid-19 digital learning needs

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Yet another review on Covid-19

Digital transformation has become an increasingly hot topic and has posed questions around the role of Human Resource Development (HRD) moving forward. Since March 2020, the Covid-19 virus, national restrictions and social distance have affected our daily activities and changed every aspect of our life. The virus has brought with it the challenge of managing work and social interactions remotely. Using digital technology to do our jobs was hard. It was new but it was, and still is, intense. Everyone should agree with the point that it has certainly affected our ability to work with short and long-term impact on how tasks are designed and how people can contribute to work. The scope of this review is simply to assess and evaluate the impact of Covid-19 towards European Small and Medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), how they could emerge from the pandemic and to what extent they have the skills and abilities to fully utilise digital learning in the future. SMEs represent the backbone of the European economy as they account for 99% of businesses with 24 million SMEs in the European Union. They generate more than half of the EU's gross domestic product while they employed about 100 million workers before the pandemic. National restrictions have more severe effect on SMEs (OECD, 2020) as they have less capital, fewer assets and lower productivity. However, we know that SMEs find ways to manage the risks which threaten to disrupt essential processes and services (Gibb & Buchanan, 2006). The International Labour Organisation (2020) argues that sustaining business operations will be particularly difficult for SMEs, therefore investment in digital skills and learning is the only way to overcome these implications in the future (Li, Ghosh & Nachmias, 2020).

Hence, SMEs have been 'forced' to change, move their practices remotely and utilise digital learning as a tool to provide some normality to their business operations. Such changes raise the question as to whether digital learning could potentially be used to support future business activities. Another effect of the pandemic is the change to how people perceive learning and the need to introduce a more human-centric digital strategy in the workplace. Some people might say 'oh no' another piece of work around Covid-19 arguing that we simply need to move away from discussing the challenges faced over the last few months. We agree with this statement, we need to move on; however, we need to utilise knowledge acquired thought the pandemic as it is a catalyst to support future changes. Working from home, using digital tools to communicate, creating shared folders and completing online learning activities are simply a few activities that describe our new day-to-day life. We think everyone would agree that Covid-19 has certainly changed many attitudes to digital learning but, are we headed for a future where learning is done entirely online or is it more complicated than that? (McKinsey, 2020c). How do SMEs utilise digital learning? Can they utilise this space to enhance performance and increase formal digital learning activities with less cost? Do they need to reinforce the digital agenda through upskilling the workforce? One thing is certain; a substantial increase in the use of digital delivery globally is underway across all segments of the workforce, from frontline managers to senior leaders.

Of course, it is too early to say how Covid-19 will ultimately affect the accelerated adoption of digital learning. Nevertheless, this editorial aims to contribute to the current debate about digital learning and the key lessons learnt due to Covid-19 restrictions. It first intends to assess the current literature around digital technologies, digital learning and digital competencies. It then moves to assess how European SMEs responded to the changes and provide some evaluation on digital learning knowledge. It is hoped that this review will provide some support for HRD practitioners and individuals interested in

digital learning and offer some help to SMEs on how they could potentially utilise digital skills in the future.

Digital technology: A very trendy word

The Covid-19 crisis has made it clear that digitisation is not as complex and lengthy a process as was often previously assumed. The necessary IT tools are available and can be integrated comparatively quickly. However, it is problematic that a focus solely on IT does not take into account the opportunities of an individual for structured and sustainable digitalisation. A digital transformation is not just an IT project. It is more than that!

Many HRD academics and practitioners never thought that digital learning would be the main force for business survival. A key strategic priority. A strategy to offer some normality for organisations. A tool to support business engagement, especially amongst SMEs. The banking crisis in 2010 offered some opportunities for changes, but not on the same scale as disruption caused by Covid-19. Literature is diverse on digital technology, arguing that it can create value and support wider organisational needs but we know that the sudden interruption of business activities has left SMEs to deal with two critical issues. Firstly, to support continuity of processes by building a new infrastructure and, secondly, to introduce support systems to enable continuity on how to develop knowledge to use digital technologies including e-learning (Papadopoulos, Batas & Bata, 2020). This was partly because SMEs have low level of digitalisation and difficulty in assessing and adopting technologies. Based on McKinsey's (2020b) research, only 56% of EU SMEs were able to offer some form of flexible work arrangements.

Despite these issues, many SMEs had to use digital and computerised methods to transmit data and deliver information in few days. Digital technology has been driving the changes in the workplace, learning processes included. Digital workplace learning can be simply defined as learning supported by digital technology for the purpose of enhancing learning and job performance (CIPD, 2017). Through the affordance of a wide range of tools and equipment, digital technology has allowed organisations, including many SMEs, to personalise their learning space, to gain extended access to learning opportunities, to enhance individual and group learning experiences by participating in learning communities, and to gain just-in-time performance support through knowledge sharing in real time. As a result, workplace learning has experienced transformative change within a short period of time. Aspects of these changes are aligned with what we already know: learners prefer learning that happens just- in-time to be able to take immediate actions rather than learning that requires going through a linear curriculum or subject-based approach (Gilmore & Anderson, 2011). Believe it or not, this is now the new reality for HRD in the digital workplace. This was probably one of the most significant changes to organisational life for decades to come. The dream became reality!

But how could digital technology offer benefits for organisations like SMEs? We already complain about the overuse of digital technologies. We complain to family or friends that we spent too much time online and engage in so many online activities on a daily basis. Regardless, digital technologies have provided SMEs the platform to make available quality information to employees in real time. In a short period, SMEs had to find a new way to move beyond organisational boundaries while simplifying employees' access to knowledge content. Suddenly, digital learning has become the trend, a necessity for organisations to build new knowledge. It is the process of supporting learning activities through a digital platform encompassing training, education information, communication, collaboration, knowledge management and performance management (Sambrook, 2004). Since 2000, numerous articles have been reinforcing the need for organisations to introduce digital learning and fully implement e-learning principles (i.e. Stevens, 2002; Sloman & Reynolds, 2003; Blocker, 2005). Some of the suggestions were received with scepticism due to the need for social interaction and utilisation of existing office

space. Others perceived digital learning as a tool for advanced organisations who have the workforce and the infrastructure to deliver such activities.

However, the pandemic has highlighted a key issue, an issue that have been widely discussed in the literature. Digital learning is inherently complex (Stevens, 2002). This was clearly the experience with most professionals across the globe. For years, organisations have been trying to use e-learning to supplant or substitute face-to-face interactions between individuals. We know that e-learning addresses business issues such as reducing costs, providing greater access to information and accountability for learning, and increasing employee competence and competitive agility (Blocker, 2005). However, Covid-19 has taught us a big lesson! Any digital activities should be based on specific goals and values to offer the effectiveness needed in times of uncertainty. Schetler (2003) argued that e-learning is more effective when combined with traditional forms of learning and that the future lay in some form of 'blended learning' solution. This might be the case when we go back to normality, but not when functioning fully online. Nevertheless, if we have to keep some knowledge from our recent experience it is that for digital learning to work, organisations need to have high-quality information, timely accessibility and clear goals. Offering and more targeted online learning could be ideal for SMEs. All combined could potential increase the quality of learning of the individual, the team and the organisation which, in turn, will contribute to organisational innovation and performance (Li & Herd, 2017).

Let me introduce my new friend, digital learning

A question that tends to dominate discussions is what the new 'normal' is going to look like after the pandemic. Literature offers extensive advice on how organisations should respond to digital needs but it is critical to examine the extent to which SMEs could build organisational resilience and drive digital learning in the future. To what extent is the current trend of using digital learning as a key tool to upskill the workforce simply a temporary approach to cover the lack of social interaction? Or is it the beginning of much more? As mentioned before, digital learning and HRD practices are effective when they are fully embedded into organisational cultural and performance needs. However, do we have the skills and capacity to remain ambitious? Radical, new, positive change might encourage many SMEs to recognise that digital learning is not simply a developmental activity but a strategic tool to fuel future activities and protect organisational success. We believe that digitally-enabled learning experiences have created new benefits for SMEs. Of course, there is a need to have a stable digital infrastructure; nevertheless, we have seen evidence to suggest that the digital workplace has positively changed skills requirements regarding the recruitment of new employees. For example, digital learning has been used as a platform to develop key, new skills for online recruitment and, most importantly, to develop the capacity to assess applicants. This is not a new idea or something that we have not done before. Large organisations have been using data science and artificial intelligence applications to inform recruitment practices for years. What is new is the scale of online recruitment and how digital learning has been used as a tool to digitalise the recruitment cycle, even amongst SMEs. It is the scale of the task and the level of innovation identified by many organisations. A level and speed of innovation that we have not seen before amongst SMEs. A level of interaction that has changed leaders' perception on how digital technologies could support and maintain effective change. They probably needed to experience first-hand the need for a digital workplace to raise their awareness of the importance of digital skills. Well, they did that in a very short period of time due to government restrictions.

This leads to another question. What is the role of HRD here? Is there any significant contribution to shape future digital learning practices? We know that HRD is under pressure to create more value with fewer resources, especially within SMEs. Covid-19 has reinforced one key dimension; HRD is the driving force to enable digital learning

creating flexible, effective digital workplaces for SMEs. We know that digital technologies have helped and will further help SMEs to improve HR functions including recruitment, performance, learning, training and, most importantly, create high levels of resilience amongst leaders. Reskilling and upskilling of employees through virtual and digital learning platforms will soon become a reality, the norm. Of course, when we go back to normality, organisations would have more flexibility to offer a blended learning experience. Around the world, organisations are using digital learning to increase collaboration among teams that are working either remotely or across different time zones, as they take courses together and collaborate in virtual formats (such as videoconferencing and instant messaging). Digital learning could work well in most cases! Therefore, we believe that HRD future priorities are changing. There is a swift change from investing in the infrastructure and logistics necessary for 'live' training to a more digitally-based learning space. A space that SMEs will have a leading role in! A role for positive change towards improving organisational practices.

And the winner is digital competencies

The dream comes true. Digital competency is now a mainstream organisational strategy. As the workplace has become digitalised, individuals' engagement with digital technologies and the application of new knowledge gained from digital environments has been the driving force to support organisational activities. Interestingly enough, a hybrid conceptualisation of the digitally competent persona with abilities to understand instrumental knowledge and have excellent digital literacy, be fluent or native-like with technologies and being able to communicate and collaborate (via social networks) (Bughin et al., 2018) are key future competencies. However, the pandemic has brought to light and intensified a very sensitive question of age: are the elderly employees as willing to learn as the younger ones due to the persisting disruption in the working world? What is the role of the HRD in supporting this target group in their digital up- and/or re-skilling and future employability? Therefore, willingness to learn and, more importantly, to use digital competencies while working from home is another important element for SMEs.

Navigating a digital working environment has never been more relevant than during national lockdowns. Change happened overnight, therefore, employees' willingness and openness to learn contributed to addressing operational and other organisational issues. Most employees in SMEs did not have a choice. They had to change and support their organisations; otherwise, there was the fear of redundancy or furlough. In May 2020, we heard from 8,000 office-based employees, managers and C-suite executives (aged 18-60) across Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Spain, the UK and the USA, forming a clear picture of the new era of work (Adecco, 2020) and what competences must be of value. For example, Switzerland registered 156,000 unemployed, almost 55,000 more than during the previous year towards the end of the first lockdown. The dramatic raise of unemployed workers was the consequence of the shutdown due to Covid-19. In these uncertain times the question arises, what kind of skills should employees possess to protect themselves from possible lay-off measures? Obviously, there is no guarantee that one is safe during these turbulent times. However, there are definitely certain skills, values and mind-sets that play a significant role when it comes to the question of one's personal employability in the post-Covid-19 economy.

There is no doubt that flexibility should be at the top of the list. We are now finding ourselves in a real-life case study of a constant change. No one knows what tomorrow will bring. Therefore, a fast, flexible decision-making is required. Being at ease and staying calm while working remotely most of the time, adapting quickly to the overall new working framework and, above all, being creative in such a new setting are valuable skills for an employee today. According to the Adecco (2020) study, 77 per cent of senior level executives believe that a company would benefit from an adaptable, flexible mind-set of employees in the post-Covid-19 era. This is even more important for SMEs. They

benefit from a digital skill set. In fact, digital skills include, now more than ever, not only the skill of working with the web-based tools but the so-called "home-office-skill" which goes hand-in-hand with self-management and self-efficacy. Being locked-up in a "home-office" brought to light what gaps current employees have in terms of digital competencies and where HRD has to become active to help close those gaps.

Employees that do more than they should, employees who think as entrepreneurs, employees who take over responsibility and employees who have new ideas and pass them to the senior management certainly stand out from the crowd. Being proactive is a skill that is of vital importance, especially for SMEs. Being proactive boosts a further important skill; problem-solving capacity. The demand for new solutions is higher than it was before Covid-19. Being a good problem-solver also means being resilient. Now the question arises, what could HRD do to boost the resilience of employees during this fast and constant change in post Covid-19 digitisation? The answer to this is social competences. SMEs should reinforce and rebuild social interaction in a digital working environment. Employees who choose to work in SMEs value personal exchange with other employees and want to have a family feeling while working. However, they are much less supportive of virtual communication than, say, employees of a larger organisation, where teleconferencing has been a usual daily routine prior to Covid-19. Nowadays, virtual communication via digital tools happens easily across the globe; but a truly efficient digital, well-informed communicator is the one who can make the counterpart feel like he or she is just next door, who can nurture trust and build confidence across physical distances via digital tools. If one succeeds in doing that, one succeeds in motivating and engaging employees in SMEs. HRD has a key role to build effective, future digital communicators with a high degree of social competencies. SMEs should be able to offer effective team-based activities based on trust and a fair portion of resilience.

European SMEs and response to Covid-19

SMEs have been the lifeblood of the European economy. A recent McKinsey survey (2020a) with more than 2,200 SMEs in five European countries (France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom) shows that barely a single SME was prepared for the consequences of national lockdowns. Almost every aspect and element of SMEs were affected by the crisis: the way they work, access information, communicate, make decisions, buy or to sell products, and re-skill employees, everything went digital. There was no time to reflect and assess the risks, there was only enough time left to come up with ad-hoc solutions to daily challenges. For example, flexible working models are conquering the German SMEs. Before Covid-19, 88% of SMEs operated with mandatory in-person work at the office. Today, 81% of SMEs in Germany expect that the Covid-19 crisis will make the working models more flexible long-term. In Switzerland, SMEs make up 99% of all companies, a driving force of the Swiss economy. In both Germany and Switzerland, we can split SMEs in two groups according to their response to Covid-19: there are optimistic and pessimistic SMEs. Optimistic SMEs obviously have more employees with the above-discussed skills that help survive the crisis than the pessimistic ones. The optimistic SMEs are enthusiastic about the solidarity of employees, about their resilience and flexible mind-set, about the strong team spirit that was already there before the Covid-19 crisis. Thus, Covid-19 helped to prioritise skills that are less relevant in a digitised world and brought to light those that are indispensable for survival and the successful function of an SME in a condition of a constant digitally-induced change. Employees of optimistic SMEs say that, even in the home office, work gives them back a feeling of normality.

On the other hand, SMEs are the weakest link in the Covid-19 crisis. They are currently worse off compared to the first lockdown in March 2020: the turnover is massive. According to the "NZZ am Sonntag", a study by the Enterprise for Society Centre now shows that many SMEs in Switzerland are worse off financially in the second wave of the

pandemic than during the lockdown in spring 2020. The companies expect a massive drop in turnover of 19 percent on average for the entire year 2020. Every third entrepreneur, corresponding to 200,000 SMEs, fears for their economic existence. The University of Lausanne and the Swiss Institute for Business Cycle Research (KOF) of the ETH Zurich are behind the study. The study is based on a survey of almost 800 SMEs from all sectors throughout Switzerland.

The most disturbing factor in the Covid-19 crisis is uncertainty. So, how resilient do employees need to be to live and work in this constant state of uncertainty? Many employees have been forced to perform different tasks in order to stay employed and start re-skilling while doing their new job. The question that HRD experts have to answer is how can we build up on this ad-hoc learning experience and develop a long-lasting approach of up and re-skilling employees of SMEs in both production and service sector? Even in times of uncertainty, we have to have a feasible approach to HRD because SMEs will remain the main pillar of a digitalized European economy after the pandemic. And yet digital transformation is an ongoing process that can only succeed if everyone is on board. This requires not only technical tools but, above all, a proactive corporate culture. An understanding of the digital transformation is also essential.

Knowledge gained by European SMEs response

Post Covid-19, the business environment will be significantly different to what it was before March 2020. Throughout history, organisations were able to adopt and evolve regardless the wider socio-economic changes. There will certainly be a long period of uncertainty and economic transformation after the pandemic, nevertheless, there are a number of wider digital learning practices that SMEs should continue using in the future. Reflecting on current best practices in Europe, SMEs should continue to seek funding to foster connectivity. SMEs should continue reinforcing the link between business outcomes and longer-term capability building. Digital learning does not occur only in a one-off, discrete event. The Covid-19 experience shows that digital learning strategies should be delivered as part of a broader long-term learning strategy in order to be successful. Currently, travel restrictions may affect in-person learning, therefore SMEs should continue using digital technologies as a platform to further capacity and harness the benefits of digital learning in the future. Of course, access to stable and reliable online platforms is necessary, therefore, utilising existing government programmes to support business development might be needed.

Digital learning might be the solution for addressing SMEs skills gap in certain industries and use this platform as a way to re-skilling the workforce. The pandemic has certainly changed the wider agenda on skills development and enabled SMEs to think about broad-based digital and upskilling training to address drastic changes to operational activities and changes in the traditional way of working. Given that SMEs have a greater flexibility, upskilling through fast and efficient digital learning, might make them more resilient to change and enhance further their competitive edge. Today, as a result of shutdowns, SMEs are under more pressure than ever to reduce costs and find new ways to maintain profitability whilst at the same time responding to the challenge of digital up-skilling. Reflecting on the initial response to business restrictions, SMEs would certainly benefit by having a more tailored approach to digital learning. There is a requirement for new leadership thinking, moving away from the idea of a one-size-fits-all solution. This argument might sound familiar to most people. It has been widely expressed in the literature over the years. The difference now is that most SMEs have realised that using digital learning can offer them the 'extra' support needed to change, sustain and evolve their businesses while at the same time keeping HRD costs low to re-launch their businesses after the pandemic. Business reaction to national restrictions is the real proof that digital learning can create opportunities to promote existing digitally enabled portfolios of learning offerings as a way to help colleagues during challenging times. The main challenge is how SMEs could communicate the changes and understand

personal motivation without social interactions. This could only be addressed by having active participation in digital learning.

Further to this, digital learning enabled SMEs to reimagine value creation. They were able to crystallise organisational values and the learning agenda or, put simply, re-learn how to learn. As mentioned before, Covid-19 has accelerated the digital transformation for organisations around the world with employees being forced to work remotely and resort to different technologies to deliver their work. The transition process from physical to online, digital workplaces have encouraged many SMEs to rethink their values and enable employees to develop new skills and better understand technology, regardless the age. This was an invaluable experience. Therefore, SMEs should continue implementing digital learning practices to equip all employees with the necessary digital skills and tools needed to succeed in the future. After all, SMEs' flexible nature is now their competitive advantage in reforming their organisations.

Digital skills also removed bureaucracy amongst SMEs. Indeed, bureaucracy. Well, they did not have a choice; they had to change internal processes by using online activity if they wanted to maintain some form of business normality. Suddenly, learning about online storage platforms, online meetings and digitalising processes become the norm. Any complex bureaucratic requirements had to be addressed using digital technologies. Interesting enough, a survey by Eurochambres (2019) shows that 785 of European SMEs struggle with administrative procedures hindering their ability to thrive. Covid-19, and the learning gained by this experience, might have contributed to address such an issue. However, according to European Commission (2021) only 17% of SMEs have so far successfully integrated digital technology into their businesses. Governments across Europe offer pilot initiatives to accelerate SMEs' take up of e-commerce solutions since the pandemic has pushed small enterprises to digital business models. This is a unique opportunity as digital learning could be the driving force to raise awareness, help business to understand future needs and create the knowledge capacity needed to utilise the digital space. Digital workplace and learning could encourage SMEs to focus on innovation and market access by developing the skills and knowledge via digital learning.

Hopefully, this review offers the reader some answers on how SMEs could emerge from the pandemic and whether digital learning could potentially be utilised to support future practices. Unfortunately, we still have not adequately explored all the issues that emerged from the pandemic. Exploring further how SMEs adapted to the digital workplace, the role of leadership in providing support, employee well-being and the sustainability of digital learning are just few areas that need further exploration. This is the only way that we can have a meaningful participation as HRD professionals in the creation of future learning practices in SMEs. Of course, we need to be mindful of the diverse nature of SMEs, their size, location and wider external factors. Nevertheless, Covid-19 enabled us to ensure that we need to think collaboratively and simultaneously if we want to develop convergent solutions to key issues. This is not new for HRD professionals; we have been encouraging organisations to innovate and put learning at the centre of business strategy. The business environment is now so different. It is now the time to explore how to learn, how to solve problems and how to overcome barriers in a digital workplace. Covid-19 has certainly offered us the space and forum to make a meaningful contribution to shaping the future of all organisations, including SMEs. Is academia ready to support future needs? Are we ready to take the first seat in driving future organisational practices? The answer is not easy!

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