

HPC COLLABORATIVE L&D RESEARCH

Blended Learning Survey Report

hpc •

“The future of L&D is exciting as we have now experienced new ways of learning.

It's really important that we don't go back to the method we were more comfortable with. We need to really challenge ourselves to new ways of learning and creativity.

HPC Blended Learning Survey Respondent

HPC's Blended Learning Survey examines and provides insights on how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected Learning and Development Teams and the work they do.

Specifically, we wanted to understand:

- How the pandemic impacted the tools utilised by L&D teams
 - Whether the pandemic had altered their strategy
 - The experience of using virtual tools as a delivery method
 - The potential blend of learning tools post-pandemic
 - The potential future demands on L&D teams as we emerge from the pandemic
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The feedback from the survey is extremely insightful and clearly outlines the benefits and challenges that teams faced as they pivoted to virtual for all learning requirements in March 2020. The feedback suggests that the pandemic has given L&D professionals a generational opportunity to evaluate new tools and to transform the perspective of learners. As L&D teams have embraced this opportunity, it appears that their reputation internally has benefitted.

The experience of using virtual tools has generally been a positive one but not without its challenges. Ease of administration and increased accessibility to learning are mixed with technical challenges and a more rigid learning format that reduces opportunities for informal learning. From a learner experience perspective, the data is more mixed and suggests that more work is required to make the virtual learning experience as positive as it can be.

As restrictions on face-to-face events are eased, L&D professionals anticipate a rise in learning activity during 2022 with much of this activity expected to be virtual. Even allowing for a significant shift to virtual delivery tools, the data suggests that a much greater blend of delivery methods is likely. A return of in-person learning in the areas of leadership development, team building and 1:1 coaching is envisaged by respondents in 2022.

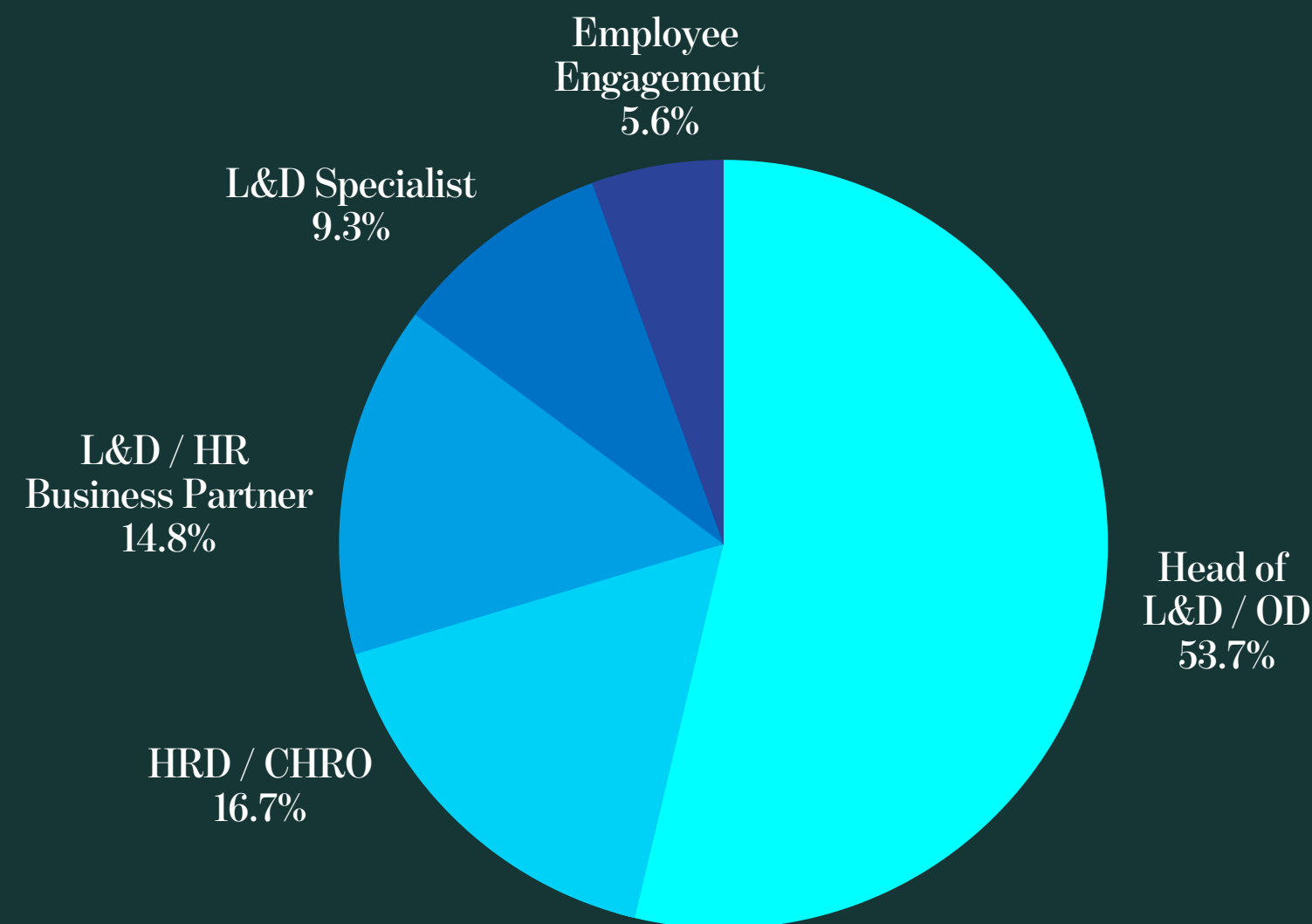
While there is no question that virtual learning accelerated and exploded during the pandemic and carries significant benefits, the survey indicates that there is further work to be done to cement the learnings, deliver an outstanding learner experience and align the optimum blend of delivery tools based on the strategic needs of the business.

50+

RESPONDENTS

The survey was issued to a sample of HPC's clients and contacts. We received more than 50 responses to the survey with an overall completion rate of 40%. The only biographical question that we asked was the role of each respondent and the chart below represents these roles.

The survey was deliberately designed to be "light touch" and was administered solely via an online instrument. Having analysed the data in great depth since the survey closed, we are confident that the survey is an accurate reflection of the experience of many L&D teams.





A rise in virtual learning

The impact of new tools on L&D

The learner experience

Increased levels of L&D activity in 2022

A new blend

Five key themes

Analysing the survey required us to examine more than 1200 data points and use these to draw our conclusions. When we looked at the data, five key themes emerged and we have structured our report to reflect these.

A rise in virtual learning

There has been a significant shift to virtual methods of delivery and the intent of respondents is that these methods will remain part of their offering in the future.

The impact of new tools

The use of new tools has led to a number of benefits for L&D teams as well as a perception that the introduction of new tools has had a positive impact on how L&D teams are viewed by their stakeholders.

The learner experience

L&D professionals have mixed views on how virtual learning impacts the learner experience. Some feel that it has encouraged greater dialogue and allowed some learners to flourish while others feel that learners are more distracted.

Increased activity

Two thirds of respondents plan for an increased level of activity in 2022 with another 15% believing that activity levels will remain the same as pre-pandemic.

A new blend

The number one criteria for determining whether or not learning is face to face is the need to create connection. However, not all learning requires this level of connection and we examine the potential for a new blend of learning to emerge.

A rise in virtual learning

93%

of respondents identified face to face workshops or physical learning events as their leading method of delivery pre-pandemic

A rise in virtual learning

Despite numerous reports identifying virtual tools as the way forward, the use of these tools prior to the pandemic was limited.

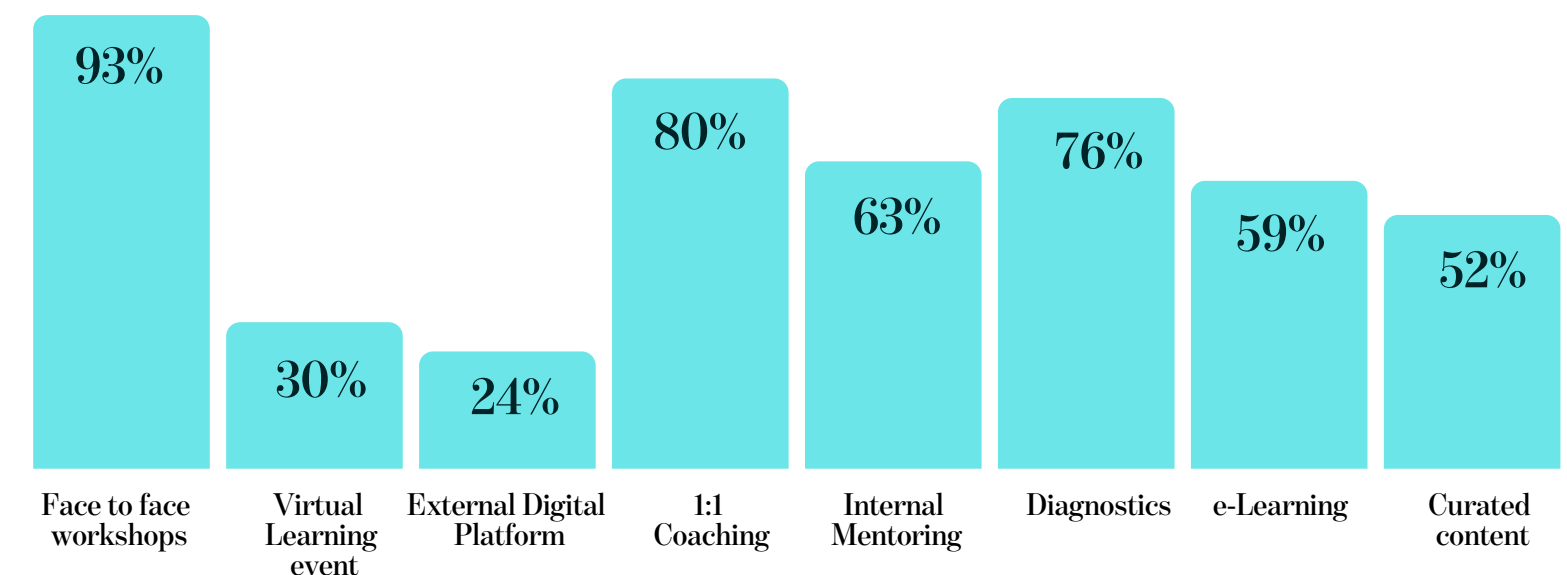
Perhaps unsurprisingly, face to face workshops or in-person learning events were the most used delivery methodology prior to the pandemic, as the graph below suggests.

Just over 93% of participants reported using in-person with 80% using 1:1 coaching and 76% using diagnostic tools such as 360 feedback and personality instruments as part of their development offering. Internal mentoring was also a popular method of development with 63% of respondents utilising in-house knowledge and experience to build capability.

Digital and remote learning tools were used by respondents prior to the pandemic but to a lesser extent. The tool most likely to be used by respondents was e-Learning whether designed in-house or provided by external partners.

Virtual learning events delivered through online platforms were less common with only 30% of survey respondents stating that they had used Zoom, MS Teams or Webex to deliver learning events. External digital learning platforms such as LinkedIn Learning or Degreed were used by 24% of survey respondents.

Learning tools used pre-pandemic



New methods adopted or increased

As the pandemic took hold and workforces either went on furlough or switched to a virtual model, L&D teams responded by adopting digital tools for delivery.

The top 4 tools adopted during the pandemic were:

- Virtual learning events
- Virtual coaching
- Virtual mentoring
- e-Learning content (developed internally or externally)

Virtual learning events became the most adopted tool during the pandemic for a number of reasons:

- Easy access to relatively inexpensive technology
- Relative ease of conversion from face to face to virtual although as we shall see later, this perception of ease of conversion impacts the learner experience
- Speed of deployment - given the need to respond quickly to the restrictions on work, L&D teams needed to use tools that had speedier turnaround times.

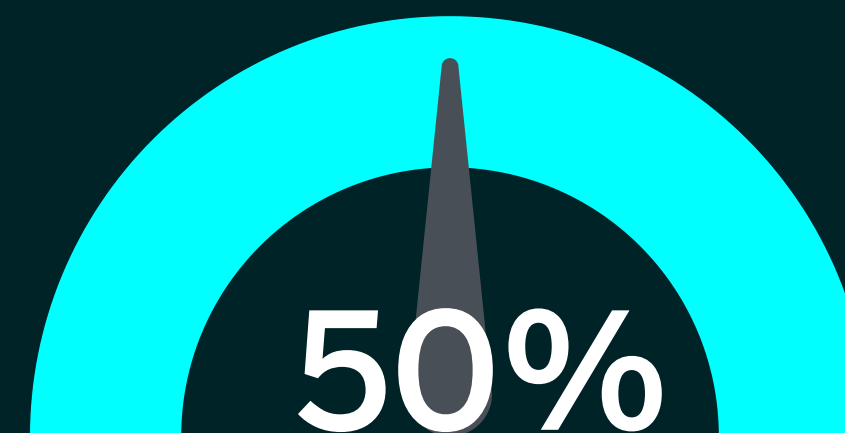
VIRTUAL LEARNING EVENTS



VIRTUAL COACHING

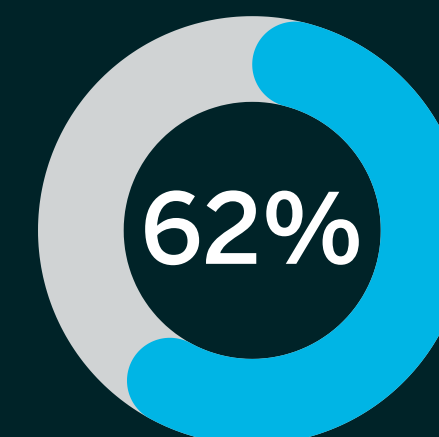


VIRTUAL MENTORING



E-LEARNING

* DEVELOPED IN-HOUSE OR EXTERNALLY



It is in looking to the future that we see the greatest potential change.

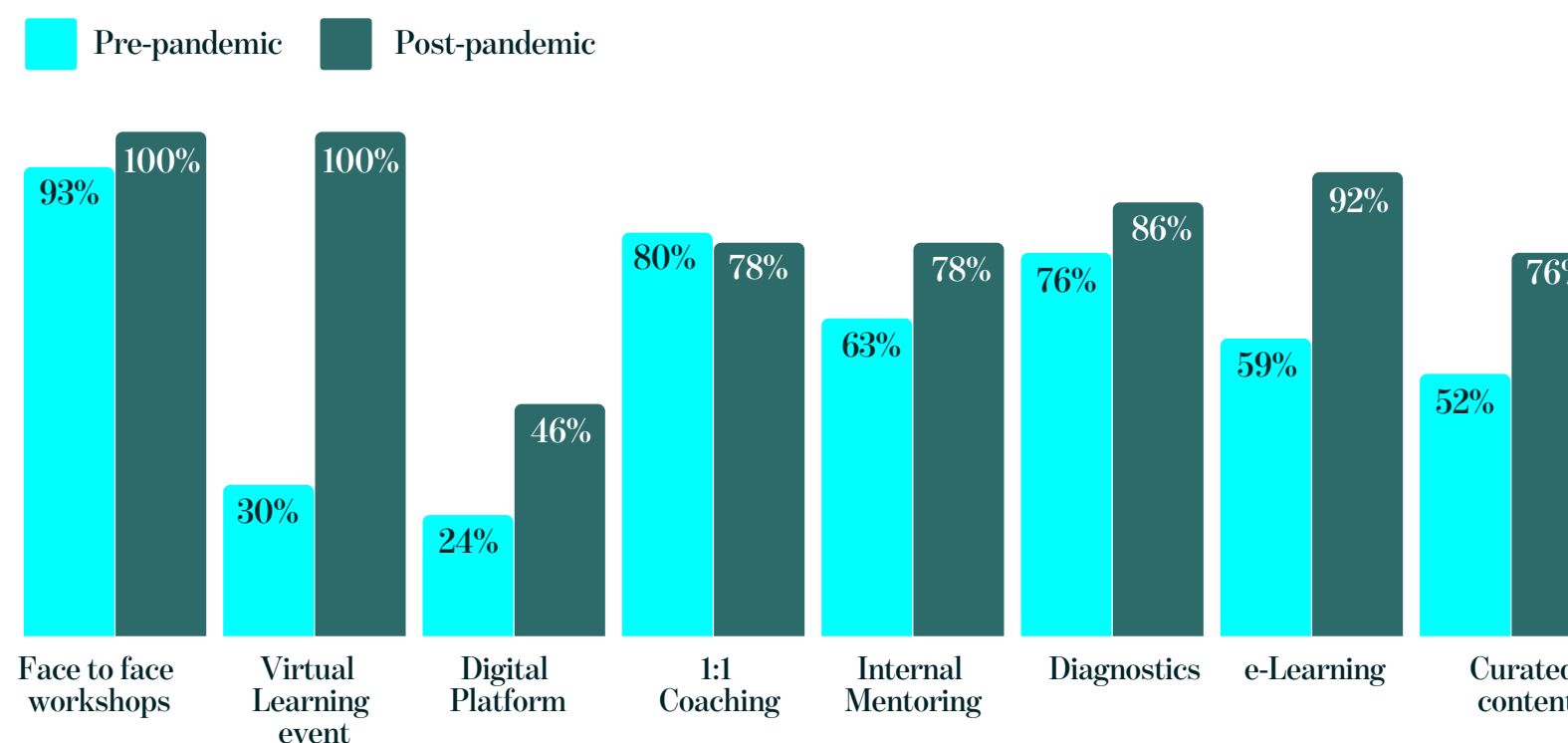
The challenge for L&D teams is to resist the temptation to rebuild the past. Our data suggests that L&D professionals intend to build a new future.

It is in looking to the future that we see the greatest potential change to how learning is delivered. When asked what methods they were likely to use as we emerge from the pandemic, respondents selected a wide variety of options.

All respondents expect to use both in-person and virtual learning events post pandemic. e-Learning follows closely on 92%. Diagnostics jumped as well with 86%, followed by coaching and mentoring on 78%.

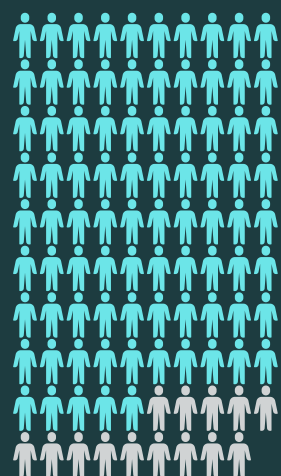
This suggests a new, more flexible, bespoke blend of delivery methods may emerge post-pandemic, which we discuss later in the report.

A comparison of learning tools / pre- and post-pandemic



The impact of new tools

PERCEPTION OF L&D IN THE BUSINESS



85%

of respondents indicated that the use of new tools/new ways of learning had positively impacted the perception of the L&D team within their organisation

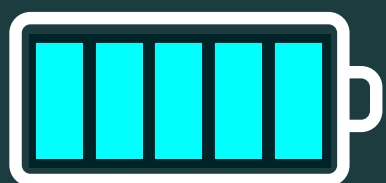
POSITIVE IMPACT ON ATTENDANCE

82% of respondents reported that the increased use of virtual delivery methods had a positive impact on attendance



TIME & COST EFFICIENCIES

100%



selected time and cost efficiencies as a key reason for retaining virtual tools as part of their offering

IMPACT ON ADMINISTRATION

73% of respondents reported that it was easier to administer virtual learning events



ACCESSIBILITY

"Virtual learning has increased diversity of the attendees."



WIDER CONTRIBUTORS

"Better access to international and guest speakers and for senior management to drop into the sessions."



FLEXIBILITY

"The ability to run shorter sessions in a flexible way that fits into people's day without greater travel disruption."



Overall, the survey indicated that the experience of digital tools has been extremely positive. This positive experience manifests itself in three key ways:

- Administrative ease and flexibility for L&D teams
- More inclusive learning culture
- Enhanced reputation for the L&D team

Administrative ease & flexibility

When asked about their experience of organising virtual events compared to face to face, 73% of participants indicated that their experience was positive. While this is largely to be expected, the reduction in administrative burden should not be discounted and has allowed teams to direct their energy elsewhere as can be seen in the quotes below.

"Reserving time and energy - not having to spend so much time on little things e.g. catering and room or attendance and more time available for strategic things like evaluating data for needs, responding to direct needs of teams or individuals"

"Less administration, planning, organisation and costs in arranging virtual sessions versus in-person residential training."

Survey respondents also commented on the significant cost saving on venue costs and travel.

"The ease of set up, cost efficiencies, ability to reach larger audiences."

More inclusive learning culture

Virtual learning has provided greater accessibility to learning for all employees. Location, travel, spending time away from home are no longer considerations or barriers for employees. Survey respondents have commented that virtual learning has enabled them to include a broader employee spread across multiple locations and jurisdictions. This has enhanced cross company team collaboration and company networking. Virtual learning has also improved equality of access to learning and has increased the diversity of attendees.

"More inclusive as different groups of employees, from a variety of geographies can learn together."

"Virtual learning has increased diversity of the attendees."

"All locations can attend workshops improving cross location collaboration and discussions and reaching a broader employee base with greater ease."

No doubt the ease of learning has been the benefit. Virtual learning opens up lots of new exciting opportunities.

“The pandemic elevated the need for L&D to support our people in adapting to disruption.

HPC Blended Learning Survey Respondent



Enhanced reputation for the learning & development team

An interesting and noteworthy impact of the use of new tools has been the impact on the reputation of the L&D team. Respondents reported that they believed the adoption of new tools had enhanced their reputation across the organisation. Based on the comments, we believe that this is driven by 3 factors:

In an age of disruption, the adoption of virtual learning tools allowed L&D teams to create shorter, more flexible sessions that minimised disruption for participants. This ability to support the business during a critical time while reducing the impact on diaries and schedules has been a significant benefit.

The ability to run shorter 90-120 minute sessions in a flexible way that fits into people's day without greater disruption (caused by travel).

The ability to access high quality international and national speakers was also commented on. This has allowed L&D teams to access expertise, insight and credibility that may previously have been unavailable to them.

Finally, in a period where time was precious and there was increased focus on well-being and mental health, the use of virtual tools facilitated asynchronous learning allowing learners to access content at a time that suited them.

“The ability to record sessions and to attend them at any time. I caught up on a workshop that I missed ...I watched the recording while on the treadmill one evening. Win win!”

“Virtual learning has also allowed learning anytime, anywhere. The ability to record learning events allows employees to catch up at a time that suits them. It is less disruptive to attend a virtual learning event during the working day and does not impact on personal time which facilitates a better work life balance.”

The Learner Experience

57% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed when asked if virtual delivery provides a better learner experience than face to face

Despite the generally positive experience of virtual tools, there is more mixed feedback on their impact on the learner experience. When asked whether virtual delivery provides a better experience than face to face, there was a wide range of responses.

When asked whether virtual delivery provides for a better learner experience than face to face, 57% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed. Perhaps more interestingly, while 12% of respondents strongly disagreed that virtual provided for a better learner experience, nobody strongly agreed with the statement.

The average across all respondents suggested a view of the learner experience that was slightly unfavourable compared to face to face. As we will see on the following pages, this reflects views that are based on the tools themselves as well as how they have been used over the past 18 months.

Virtual learning provides a better learner experience than face to face



The key impediments to the learner experience were identified as follows:

The energy and engagement among learners was perceived to be lower. This was attributed to a more formal relationship between facilitator and learners as well as a difficulty in facilitating connectivity.

Lower interactivity due to the potential external distractions when learning virtually. There were a number of comments that people can be very easily disturbed and are more likely to allow themselves to be interrupted during a virtual session.

A reduction in opportunities available for informal learning and networking. As we will discuss later in the paper, creating connection is seen as a key benefit and reason to continue with virtual learning. Its absence is seen as detrimental to the learner experience.

“Easy building of colleague relationships on face to face basis. Also reduces opportunities for unplanned laughter, collegiality among group members in one room together.”

“The ability to network informally over a coffee break, lunch, dinner or drink if multiple days is a key element and this is sorely missed. Reading other people’s body language - very difficult to do this over Teams/Zoom.”

“Difficulty relating to facilitator/trainer. Hard to get energy from trainer and others. Difficult to read the room in relation to how content is being received. Assessing engagement has also become more challenging.”

“Fatigue and burn out of constant virtual training. The need to constantly keep employees engaged and interested.”

Challenges with technology was also viewed as a downside by survey respondents. Connectivity issues are an ongoing problem for some people, and this can lead to further distractions during a virtual event. While some virtual training tools like breakout rooms etc. are viewed as a key benefit, respondents had mixed experiences of facilitators’ abilities to effectively use the technology available.

“Technical issues on workshops, connections etc which can become disruptive in a small workshop.”

“Gaps in tech knowledge, some learners are still really resistant to the idea or perhaps even scared of using technology in their everyday role let alone using it for virtual learning.”

On the positive side, a number of respondents commented on how well-designed virtual learning could provide for an excellent learner experience.



Learning that has been specifically designed for virtual is viewed as far more preferable than trying to replicate the in-person experience.

When designed correctly, learning content is typically more tailored and delivered in quicker bite size sessions. The experience of respondents is that this increases engagement and provides for a better learning experience.

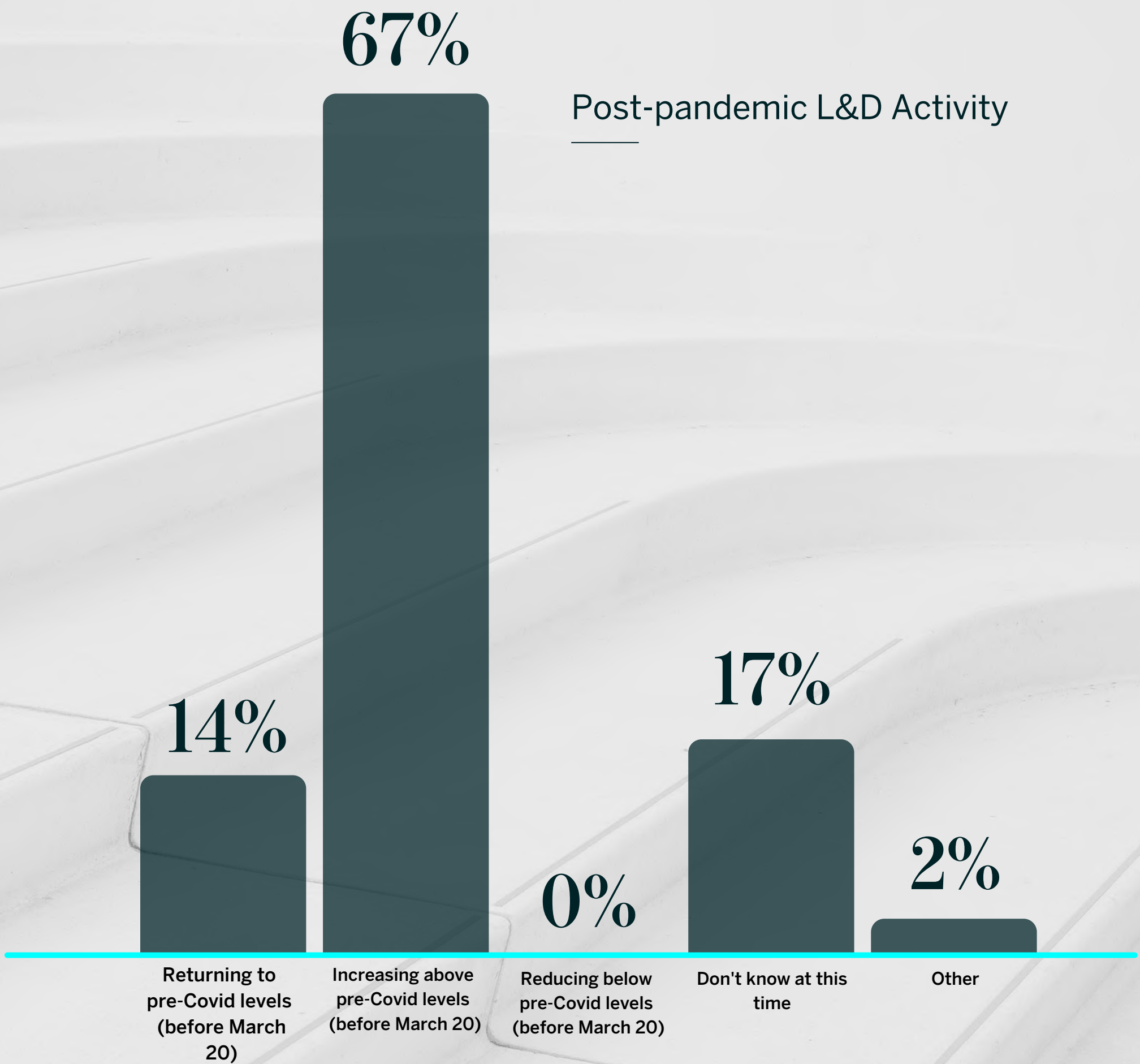
There were also a number of comments that interaction with attendees has improved significantly with the use of breakout rooms, online polls, and online messaging. For some learners, this has created greater ease and engagement in learning.

“Participation has been impacted as many feel more comfortable in remote setting versus face to face when it comes to asking questions/ getting involved in discussions.”

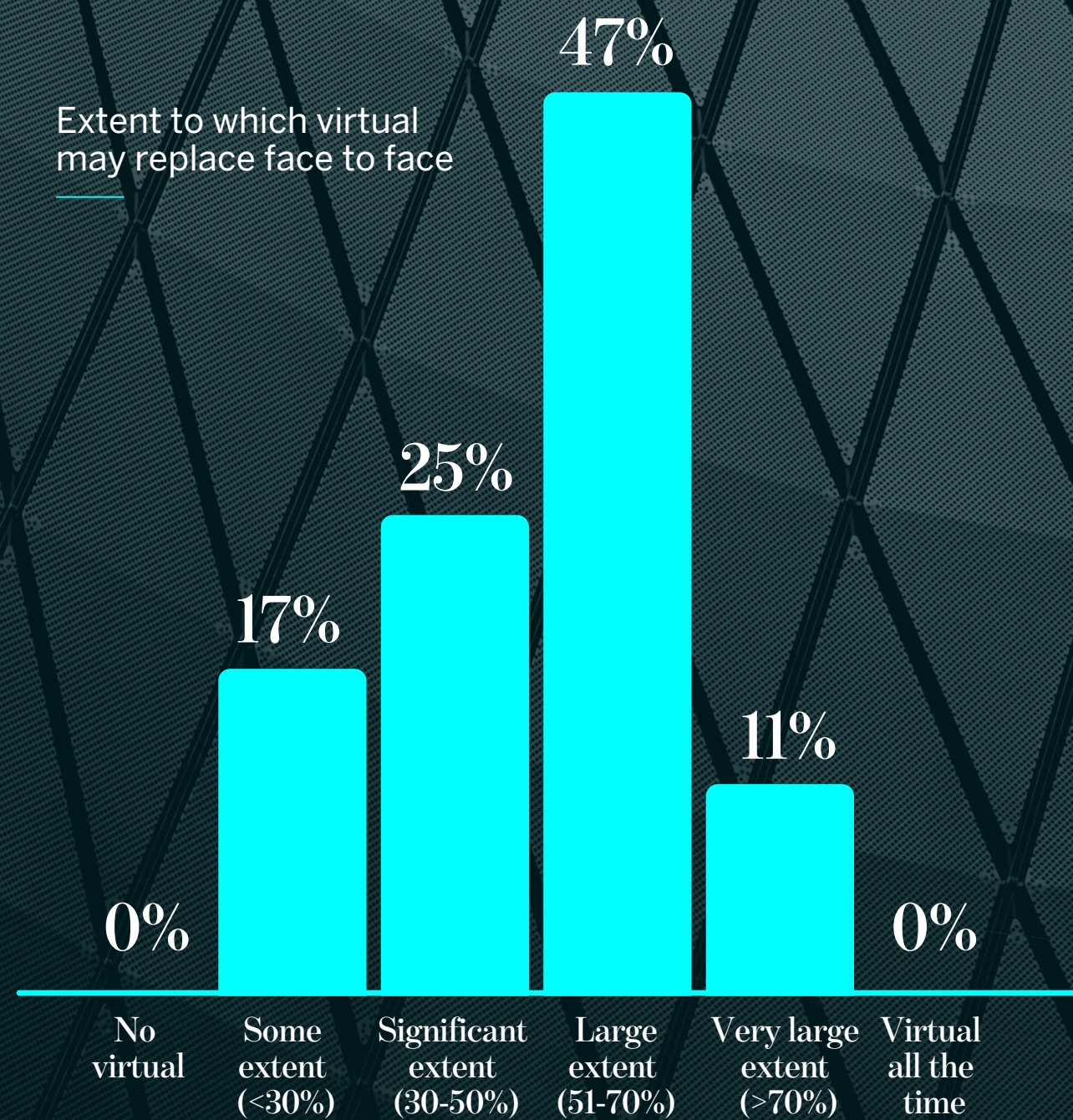
“Tailored, bite sized learning which made better use of everyone’s time. Also allowed for interaction with peers not necessarily available in a virtual world.”

Increasing Activity

As we emerge from the pandemic, confidence among L&D professionals is high that they will play an increasingly active role next year. As can be seen from the following graph, two thirds of respondents are planning to deliver higher levels of activity than prior to the pandemic.



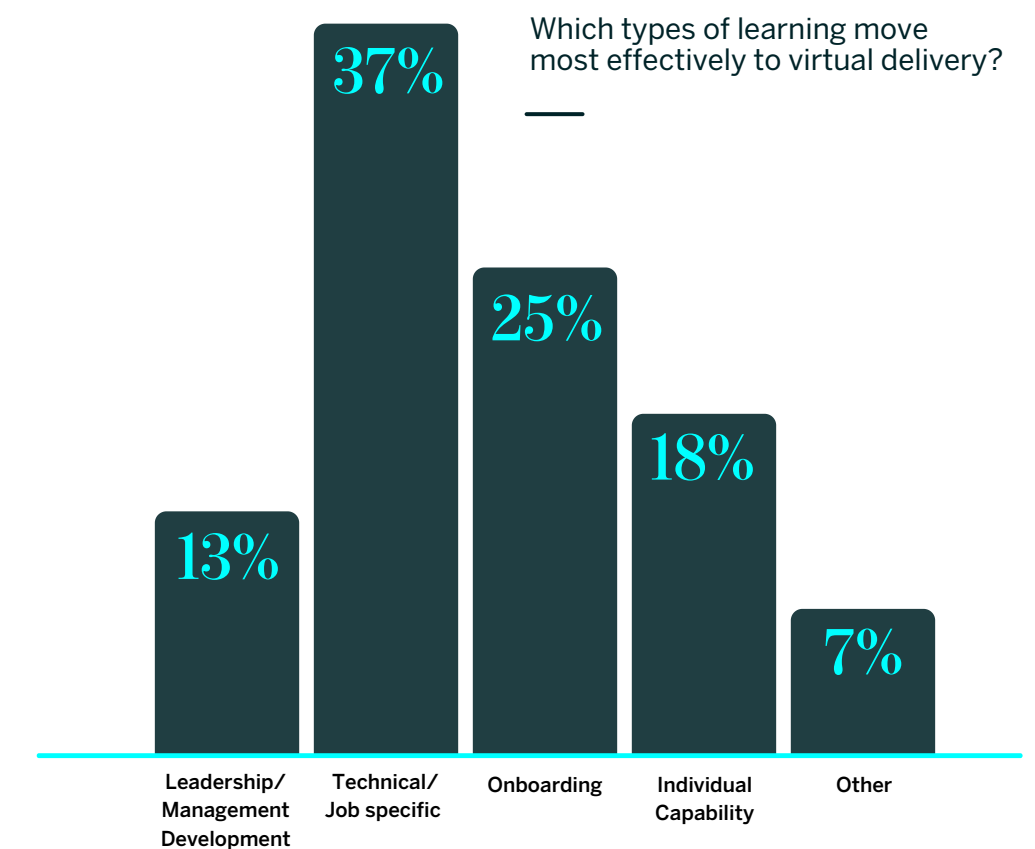
It appears that the increased volume of delivery is likely to be driven by changes in delivery methods and the requirement for L&D teams to build new organisational capabilities.



Increasing Activity

< As can be seen from the graph, 58% of respondents plan to replace in-person offerings with virtual delivery for more than half of their offerings. This switch is likely to drive increased efficiencies in the L&D team, create time and space for more partnering with the business and increase access and uptake of learning programmes. Perhaps more interestingly, none of our respondents could foresee a future where there was no virtual delivery or where all delivery was virtual.

Our data also suggests that while the shift to virtual may be partly explained by the way in which specific categories of learning are delivered, this isn't a sufficient driver in itself. While 37% of respondents identified technical training as moving most effectively to virtual, it is clear from the responses and the comments that L&D professionals believe that every type of training has the potential to switch to virtual.



The second driver of increased activity for L&D teams in 2022 is likely to be the development of new individual and organisational capabilities.

Individual capability

During the lockdown, L&D played a critical role in supporting individuals to cope with the impact of the measures on their work and personal lives.

“The pandemic elevated the need for L&D to support our people in adapting to disruption”

As we take the first tentative steps towards a hybrid working model, L&D teams will play a critical role in supporting individuals to manage their personal well-being and build greater resilience.

Enabling managerial performance

Over the past year, we have seen L&D teams support the performance of their organisations by developing the capabilities of managers to manage a remote team. Our data indicates that L&D teams are being tasked with developing managers to:

- Manage performance in a remote environment
- Communicate effectively with their team in a remote environment
- Manage difficult conversations remotely
- Manage change remotely

As 2022 draws closer, these needs are likely to remain even if the context has subtly changed as a hybrid working model emerges.

Building long-term leadership capability

Finally, our data indicates that L&D teams are considering how they develop new capabilities to support the organisation as new ways of working develop post-pandemic.

Hybrid models of working create new demands on every member of the team especially those who lead people.

Respondents to our survey have identified the need to build new leadership capabilities based on inclusion, compassion, and trust to support their organisation in the coming year.

A new blend

As most L&D teams anticipate increased activity in 2022, they will also face choices about how best to develop the people in their organisations. As restrictions unwind, there is an opportunity to utilise a greater variety of learning tools than has been the case since March 2020.

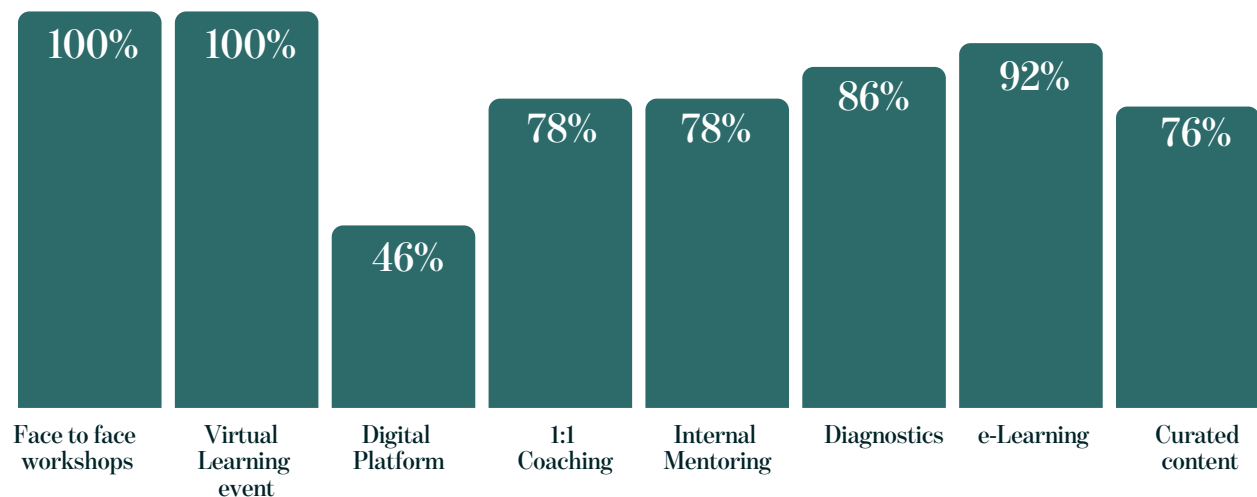


“ (The future) will be a blend of pre-reading, self-managed learning, social learning and face to face with face to face focused on context, scenarios and skills practice.

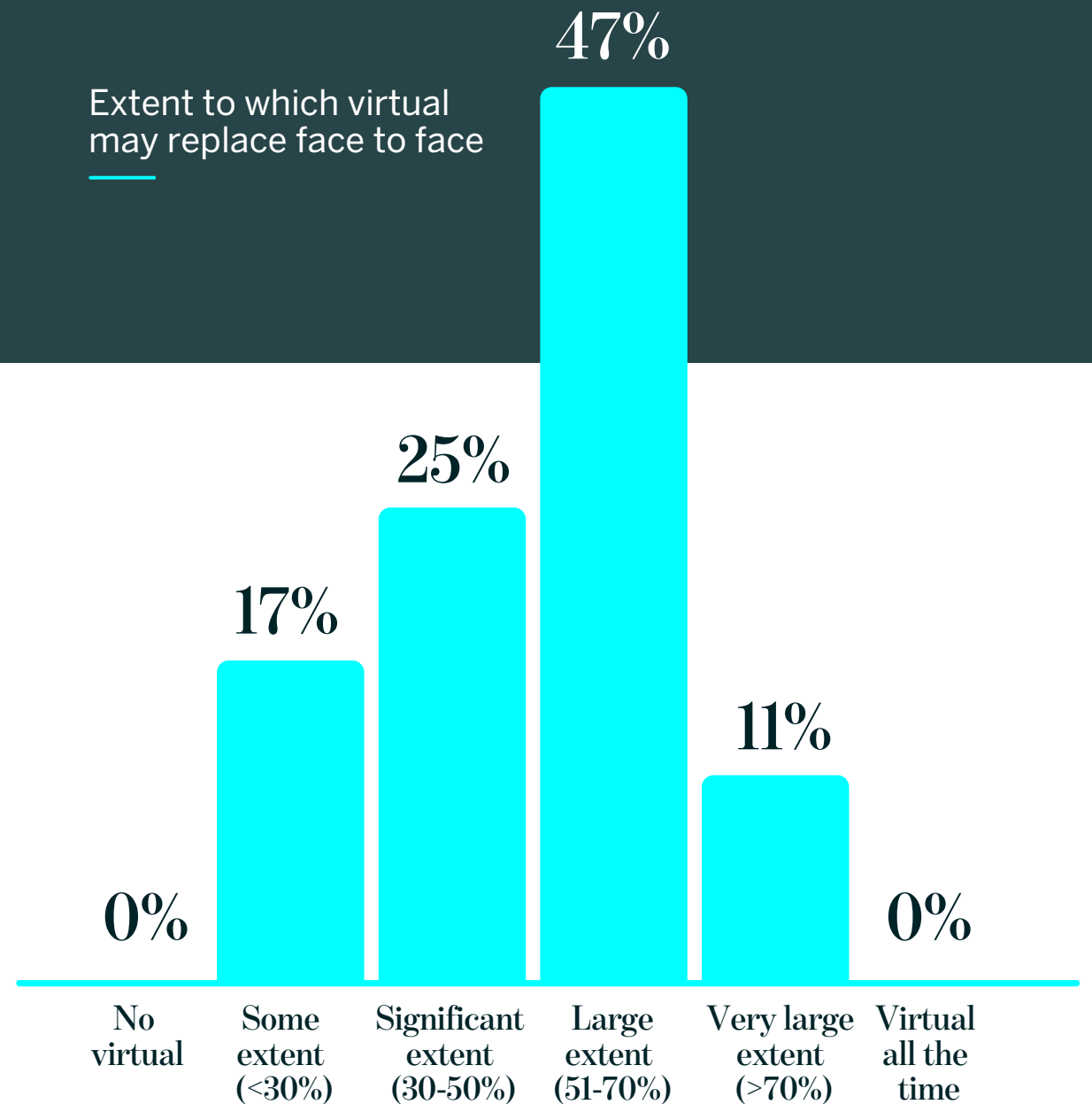
HPC Blended Learning Survey Respondent

Our data indicates that L&D teams plan to use a much greater range of tools than was the case pre-pandemic.

Based on our data, this is driven by increased confidence among L&D teams in the use of digital tools and the increased comfort of learners in learning this way.

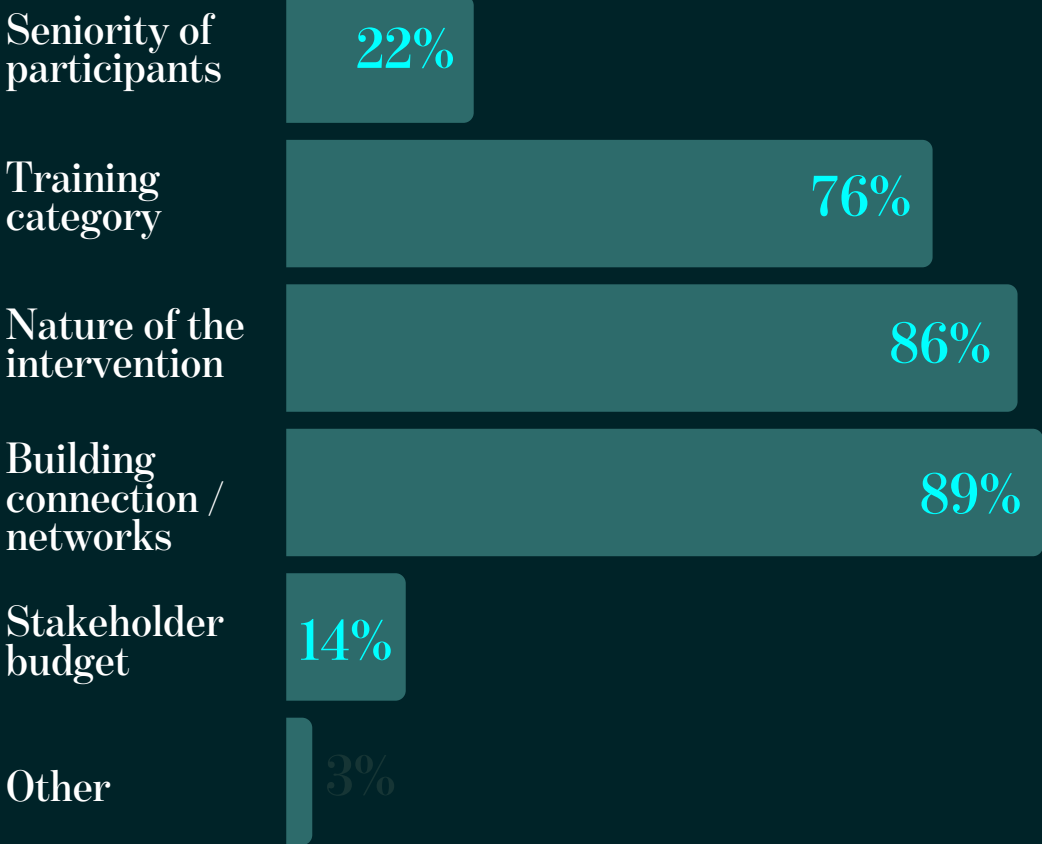


It is also clear that while L&D professionals are committed to the adoption of virtual tools, they do not envisage that 100% of learning is delivered virtually.



Criteria for face to face learning

In determining whether a learning event should be virtual or face to face, the decision is likely to be based on the need to create connection or the nature of the learning event in itself.



We noted earlier that a lack of human connection was cited as one of the key reasons why the virtual learner experience was not as positive as it could be. In considering whether to return to face to face, respondents indicated that facilitating connection was the most significant reason.

This was based on the learners being able to create greater psychological safety when face to face and the perception that people are more likely to learn in a social environment. An additional factor here is the frequent need to create informal networks of learners to support each other and to create deeper networks across the organisation.

89%
will choose face to face rather than a virtual solution when there is a strong importance placed on creating a connection between participants

The next most significant reason to select an in-person event is the nature of the learning event itself:

Events where the learner is required to be physically present to demonstrate a task or to experience something in real time were identified by a number of participants.

This includes training such as some specific Health & Safety training and job shadowing. Also identified in this category are intact team coaching, role playing and highly experiential leadership development.

“High end leadership development and programmes which focus on interpersonal skills where role play is a big element.”

While determining the need for in-person events based on the category of event e.g. behavioural, compliance etc came third, it is apparent from comments that L&D professionals have a more nuanced view.

Respondents noted that specific learning opportunities in a leadership journey were more suited to in-person. Where that is the case, they should be delivered in-person. However, they noted that there was ample scope to deliver other elements of the learning journey through alternative methods.

This shift towards a more nuanced, blended approach would appear to be a significant aspiration for many participants in 2022.

“Portions of leadership and management courses to facilitate networking of participants across the organisation and reducing silo effects.”



“It's all about alignment

The way we plan and deliver L&D in the future depends on the level of behavioural change expected. The nature of the solution will dictate the level to which we use virtual, face-to-face or a blend of both.

L&D DIRECTOR, HPC CLIENT PERCEPTIONS SURVEY // 2021

Similar to RTO plans and potential future operating models, when it comes to the future of L&D there is no one size fits all solution. The L&D strategy will continue to be closely aligned to the business strategy and implemented in the most cultural compatible manner.

Plans for the Future

“ It's really important that we don't go back to the method we were more comfortable with. We need to really challenge ourselves to new ways of learning and creativity.

HPC Blended Learning Survey Respondent

Through our work with organisations during the pandemic we have witnessed a mix of experiences and responses to individual learning journeys. We have seen L&D professionals step up to the challenge of virtual delivery, embracing it with positivity and delivering best in class solutions.

As we enter a new phase of hybrid working, L&D professionals have openly discussed their need to maintain and build upon the positive impression they have had on their business. They want to take advantage of what they have learned and avoid rebuilding the past.

HPC is working in tandem with L&D professionals to strategically align solutions to business needs and incorporate the right blend of learning methods. In this way, we hope to take the positives of the pandemic with the opportunities that lie ahead in the world of hybrid work.

Such a wide range of experiences and business outcomes means that variation and flexibility are key when considering a blended learning approach. We would be happy to share our experience and insights with you at any stage.

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