Soft skills training during a pandemic: Why it's important, and how to do it

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In this article, the author discusses the importance of soft skills training during the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of their role in defining one's employability and advancing both personal and team success in achieving goals.

Introduction

Soft skills are innate habits or personal behaviors that can affect how one works individually or as part of a team (**Table 1**, p. 2).[1,2] They have an important role in defining one's employability and advancing both personal and team success in achieving goals. Hard skills, in contrast, are teachable and can be acquired through education and experience (Table 1). Although hard skills may qualify one for a job, their value can be significantly eroded in the absence of a balanced set of soft skills.

It is more difficult for individuals to learn or acquire soft skills compared with hard skills, mainly because soft skills have generally not been part of the traditional high school or college curriculum. In addition, from the employer's perspective, soft skills are harder to measure, evaluate, and sometimes manage. For these reasons, employers, managers, and employees alike appreciate the need for and importance of work-based training in soft skills.

TABLE 1 Soft skills versus hard skills[1,2]

Soft skills*		
Adaptability/flexibility	Dependability	Problem solving
Communication (oral and written)	Drive	Self-direction
Creative thinking	Empathy	**Teamwork**
Critical thinking	Motivation	Time management
Conflict resolution	Open-mindedness	**Work ethic**
	Positivity	
Hard skills		
Computer technology	Design	Project management
Data analysis	Languages (bi- or multilingual)	Software design
Database management	Marketing	Statistical analysis
Degree, certification	Network security	

*Soft skills highlighted in blue are among the most valued and sought after in the workplace.

Soft skills training during the pandemic

Over the past 20 years, work has been a predominantly social experience for most Americans – a place where people could converse and connect with their colleagues. Those connections were disrupted when the COVID-19 pandemic required that many people work from home. The shift to working remotely has created a work and personal lifestyle starkly different from that before the pandemic. Without the daily workplace connections and with fewer encounters with people outside the home, many individuals are at a greater risk of feeling lonely and isolated as they continue to fulfill their professional responsibilities.

The regulatory profession has an important role in meeting the clinical and regulatory challenges within the scope of the pandemic. Clinical trials, drug production, and quality audits must continue. Many drug and device companies are conducting research into products that will either diagnose, treat, or prevent the COVID-19 disease. Regulatory affairs (RA) professionals in these organizations need to be aware of the applicable regulatory requirements and work with their colleagues to prepare and submit applications to the relevant agencies.

Traditionally, RA professionals would interact with their colleagues during in-person meetings and could use their interpersonal skills to foster positive relationships. Now, many employees are forced to communicate via computer, text, or phone.

When using those means of communication, one's ability to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing, becomes extremely important. Organizations that want to maintain their effectiveness should provide soft skills training so their employees can develop the skills needed for the new "work" order. The training will allow employees to connect with each other while their managers monitor and support staff engagement and assess how individuals are coping.

The right stuff

There may be times when required training, including that in the area of soft skills, is boring and seen as a waste of time by many employees. Employers who want to support their employees' growth and effectiveness need to analyze the gaps in their employees' knowledge and abilities. Conversely, the employees need to see the training as acquiring skills that will make them more productive.

In many parts of the US, soft skills training in effective communication is not taught at school. Therefore, it is generally easy to get the participants' buy-in and hold their interest if the content is relevant. Most people realize they can improve how they write, speak, or convince others to accept their point of view.

Training in other aspects of soft skills to help RA employees in this new, remote-work environment could focus on:
Improving writing skills for effective, accurate regulatory communication;
Refining tactics for a successful pitch to superiors;
Good documentation practice;
Getting buy-in and steering the direction/outcome of a meeting; and
Enabling RA professionals to be seen as indispensable advisers

The process

If RA professionals are interested in creating, delivering, and evaluating an interactive, virtual training session on soft skills or other topics, they should consider following the 12 general steps in **Table 2**.

TABLE 2 12 action steps to creating and delivering an online training course

No.	Action
1	Perform a needs assessment by interviewing employees and their managers.
2	Conduct research to determine the best tools and techniques to help participants learn the knowledge or skills uncovered in the needs assessment.
3*	Select a platform that has the appropriate functions to deliver the material.
4*	Spend the necessary time to become familiar with each of the platform's functions to determine the best tool for engaging the participants when delivering each section of the information.
5*	Prepare slides that use animation so that the content can be delivered in distinct, understandable segments.
6	Include visuals – photographs, quotes of famous people, and short videos illustrating the key points – to maintain the participants' interest.
7*	Engage participants by designing activities in which people are asked to answer a question or analyze a situation and then provide an innovative approach that the participants had not considered.
8	Create an editable PDF workbook outlining the key points of the training and that participants can annotate with additional information.
9	Post the workbook online and send a link to the participants requesting that they download a hard copy of the workbook before the session. Also, provide a link to the workbook in chat during the session.
10	Hold a pilot session and request that the participants provide feedback about: • The usefulness of the information, • Whether the trainer was able to maintain their interest, and • How the participants plan to use the material to change their behavior.
11	Modify the course based on the feedback from the survey.
12	Deliver the class and solicit feedback so that the training can be improved on a continual basis.

*Additional information about these steps is presented below.

Selecting the platform and presentation software

RA professionals can choose from several platforms for virtual training. Zoom, WebEx, Adobe Connect, and Go to Training are among the more widely used of these platforms. Although each platform has its advantages and disadvantages, the author has found Zoom to be the easiest to use and the one that provides the greatest opportunities for engagement.

In addition to the platform, one will also need presentation software. PowerPoint is the most widely used, but other options include Canva, Google Slides, Prezi, Renderforest, and Visme.

The 6-minute, 'hook-and-hold' rule

It's very easy to lose participants during a training session. The average participant's attention span is probably about 6 minutes. To maintain interest, the trainer should incorporate features that require participatory action every 5 to 7 minutes. Zoom has numerous functions, such as Reaction and Breakout Rooms, which one can use to promote interaction among participants and keep them engaged (**Table 3**).

TABLE 3 Platform features promoting participation during virtual training

Feature	How it works	Examples of how to use it	Benefit
Reaction	Participants press the 'Reaction icon" and an emoji such as 'thumbs up or thumbs down' appears under their name.	Participants can indicate if they are experiencing a problem so the instructor can help solve it.	Quick, easy for the participants to use.
Chat	Participants type responses or comments in the chat window and click the 'Enter' key for everyone to see.	Ask participants to rate their proficiency in doing a specific task, using a scale of 1 (unskilled) to 5 (highly skilled). Ask participants who rate themselves as a 5 for techniques that might help others.	Participants' names are linked to statements so the instructor can recognize those who provide interesting responses and call on them to provide additional information.
Polls	Participants select an answer by clicking on a button.	Ask participants to select the best response to a question having them select an answer from a list of options.	Participants can express their preference anonymously and then view their colleagues' responses.
White Board	Participants type their ideas simultaneously on a white board, then click on another area of the board for their comments to appear.	Ask participants to write synonyms for inflammatory words.	All of the participants' responses can be viewed at the same time; responses are anonymous.
Breakout Rooms	Participants are divided into groups and use their webcams and audio functions to discuss how they would solve a hypothetical problem. After a specified time, they return to the 'main room' and report on the group's solution.	Ask participants to share ideas with the group about the best way to solve a problem.	Participants can interact more closely with their colleagues and verbally share ideas in real time.

Optimal length of the presentation

Employees in the health care field are under intense pressure. Missing an entire day of work means making up the time after regular working hours. The author has found that participants can maintain their focus and get the maximum benefit from half-day training sessions delivered in the morning. If additional content needs to be delivered, the training can last several days so that people can attend the class in the morning and complete their other required tasks in the afternoon.

Trainer presence

In today's society, it might not be politically correct to discuss how to dress. However, in a training session where people are looking at the trainer for hours at a time, the author believes that a trainer's appearance and mannerisms will affect the reaction he/she will receive from the participants.

In a virtual session, it is recommended that trainers dress professionally. Solid-color clothing options are preferable because checks, stripes, or patterns can be a distraction. The trainer's clothes should fit properly so that a shirt, jacket, dress, or top does not ride up or wrinkle when the trainer is seated.

The trainer should look into the camera, sit, or stand up straight, and avoid touching his/her face. Being relaxed and projecting a warm smile will create a positive atmosphere for the participants to have an enjoyable experience.

Conclusion

Findings from Gallup, a global analytics and advisory firm, have shown that employee engagement is a reliable, independent predictor of valued outcomes, such as turnover, productivity, and profitability, especially during periods of disruption or uncertainty.[3,4] Gallop surveyed the level of engagement of 30,278 workers in the US, from July 13 to September 27, 2020. The results showed that 36% of employees were "highly engaged" 51% were not engaged and actively looking for new jobs, and 13% were disengaged.

The data should strike a note of caution for managers and employers about the impact that working remotely has on the wellbeing and engagement of employees during this time. RA professionals can help by creating virtual training sessions on soft skills, particularly in the area of effective communication. These sessions will give employees an opportunity to connect virtually with their colleagues, improve morale, and provide skills that will increase productivity and create a more positive working environment. This article provides tools and techniques that will enable regulatory professionals to move forward in creating such a program.

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About the author

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