

The Human Touch: Elevating Respect In The Workplace Through In-Person Learning Experiences



While browsing the news, I fell on an opinion piece discussing recent studies that measured personality changes in the aftermath of COVID-19.¹ Unsurprisingly, these studies confirmed that certain personality traits that are essential to interpersonal relationships and social harmony have been declining since the pandemic: people have become less conscientious, less cooperative, less kind towards others, and less open to the ideas of those who think differently.²

Keeping this in mind, the rise of disrespectful behaviour we have all noticed, a troubling phenomenon from which individuals are not sheltered when in the workplace, appears as no surprise.

In a recent blog,³ my colleague [Christine Thomlinson](#) mentioned that conducting enhanced (and regular) [respect in the workplace training](#) is one of the relatively simple things that organizations can do to create and maintain a workplace environment characterized by respect, courtesy, and little to no employment-related legal issues. While I could not agree more, I wanted to expand on her point and emphasize that it's crucial to consider not just the content of such training, but also the format in which it's delivered.

Over the years, I've had the privilege of facilitating numerous training sessions for both private and public organizations as well as to various groups of individuals on matters relating to discrimination, harassment, and respect at work. Through my experiences, I've come to firmly believe in the irreplaceable value of in-person training over virtual alternatives when it comes to cultivating environments of respect and understanding.

Here are some of the many benefits of in-person training:

1. More engagement and participation

Having facilitated plenty of training sessions and taught at a university in various formats, from in-person to virtual and hybrid sessions, I've consistently observed that in-person courses foster higher engagement and participation compared to virtual sessions. With a few exceptions, participants were less hesitant to ask questions and to participate in the discussions in in-person settings. My experience teaching Human

Rights Law during the second year of the pandemic led me to the conclusion that this rings true even in hybrid models. During that semester, in-class students generally demonstrated higher engagement levels than their virtual counterparts. I also noted similar variations in engagement levels among individual students based on whether they were attending in-person or online sessions!

2. Less chances that participants fall behind

Virtual settings pose challenges for trainers to monitor participants' progress effectively and provide timely support, potentially resulting in some individuals falling behind. In contrast, in an in-person setting, trainers can quickly identify when people are struggling or don't understand something, and so can provide immediate assistance and clarification. This hands-on approach ensures that no one gets left behind and fosters a supportive learning environment. Additionally, the presence of colleagues enables close interaction and quick clarification of doubts, further enhancing the overall learning experience.

3. Easier for participants to concentrate

Staying focused during virtual training or meetings can be challenging, especially as sessions lengthen. Let's be honest, we've all experienced moments of drifting off on these occasions, with numerous digital distractions at our fingertips, including phones, emails, social media, and browsing the web. Additionally, the work-from-home environment introduces its own set of physical distractions, such as unexpected interruptions from family members, pets vying for attention, or even household chores. All these distractions can significantly detract from the learning experience by fragmenting concentration and interrupting the flow of information.

In-person training offers a solution to this challenge by providing an environment free from digital distractions and physical distractions commonly found at home. The absence (or limited presence) of distractions fosters a more conducive learning environment where participants can engage more deeply with the content, leading to increased concentration and a more profound learning experience. While the skills of the facilitator and the training structure are key elements when it comes to capturing participants' attention, an in-person environment offers a unique advantage in maintaining focus and enhancing learning outcomes.

4. An opportunity for meaningful interactions

There is no doubt that the pandemic has reshaped our work environment, with more and more people working remotely. Even if some have gone back to the office in the past year or two, many continue to work from home on a part-time or full-time basis. In this context, in-person training serves as a beacon of connectivity by bringing people together, transcending the confines of virtual meetings.

One of the trademarks of in-person training is that it fosters meaningful human interactions by creating space for authentic interactions and dialogue. Participants feel more comfortable engaging in discussions, sharing personal experiences, and seeking clarification in a face-to-face setting than they do in the context of virtual training. Meaningful interactions foster a deeper understanding of the material and promote empathy among colleagues... laying the foundation for a more inclusive and respectful workplace culture. Quite fitting when training employees on respect at work, don't you think?

While virtual training offers convenience and accessibility, it may not be the most

effective format to discuss respect in the workplace. By prioritizing face-to-face interactions, organizations can create environments conducive to learning, collaboration, and, most importantly, respect. As we navigate the complexities of the modern workplace, let's not underestimate the profound impact of meaningful human connections in shaping a workplace culture characterized by inclusivity, respect, and a shared commitment to fostering a positive environment for all.

Footnotes

1. Noémie Mercier, "Sommes-nous vraiment déconfinés?" *La Presse*, March 13, 2024, online: <https://www.lapresse.ca/dialogue/opinions/2024-03-13/place-publique/sommes-nous-vraiment-deconfines.php> (in French).
2. Angelina R. Sutin et al., "Differential personality change earlier and later in the coronavirus pandemic in a longitudinal sample of adults in the United States" (2022), *PLoS ONE* 17(9), online: <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0274542>.
3. Christine Thomlinson, "5 Simple ways to help elevate workplace culture," February 29, 2024, Rubin Thomlinson's *Insights*, online: <https://rubinthomlinson.com/5-simple-ways-to-help-elevate-workplace-culture/>.

The content of this article is intended to provide a general guide to the subject matter. Specialist advice should be sought about your specific circumstances.

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