

# IF YOU THOUGHT 2020 WAS CHALLENGING

The Future of Professional Development  
in a Hybrid Working World

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## Executive Summary

The onset of the pandemic in March 2020 necessitated a shift from in person professional development to remote learning. As challenging as this time was for all of us in so many ways, the adjustment was a one-to-one tradeoff — from in person to remote learning.

The transition as we emerge from the pandemic is going to be double the challenge for communications and public affairs executives and the consultants they work with. Why? This imminent shift will, in many cases, necessitate a move from one type of learning — remote — to a hybrid system that must cater to two separate audiences — 1) in person and 2) remote. Imagine the possibilities for misfortune.

Frozen screens and halting audio may be the least of our worries. How are we to achieve equivalent learning for both hybrid learning groups? We must remain on guard to see to it that remote participants are not left by the professional wayside — denied promotions, raises, and reputational luster.

The research cited in this paper reveals how much of a challenge we face. Be prepared for a cadre of de-motivated workers who try futilely to sharpen their skills in what should be interactive media training, public speaking, and advocacy workshops. The level of interactivity is liable to take a nosedive in a hybrid format unless consultants and the corporate executives who hire them work diligently to bring these removed learners along.

The big question, of course, is what can we do about this looming shift? This paper builds toward solutions. You will not find every answer here for no one knows exactly how developments are going to shake out. The goal here is — based on examination of the change we encountered in 2020, research into learning methods, and some educated assessments — to empower you with some advantages over your competitors by giving you a sense of where professional development needs to go.

Will every consultant devote the time and energy to this new and largely unfamiliar hybrid environment? Will your consultants even know how to go about it? Perhaps yes. Perhaps no.

That's why you will find some concepts that communications and public affairs executives need to consider as the transition to hybrid professional development takes place.

I'll also walk you through some solutions, and stand ready to help you implement them when you're ready. Don't wait too long or you'll find your company lagging behind the competition.

Every business' situation is unique, so you are likely to discover unanticipated wrinkles as you delve into this new regimen. We are all absorbing knowledge as we go forward on this journey. I encourage you to [contact me](#) with your experiences so that we might share your examples for the good of our communications and public affairs community.

Ed Barks

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# Phase 1

## The Past Year's Trials and Tribulations

If you thought rearranging your professional development program in 2020 was tough, you ain't seen nothing yet.

Sure, we all had to adjust to a pandemic-forced remote learning environment. Zoom, Skype, and Teams became part of our lingo and everyday lives. But consider this: 2020 involved a mere one-to-one exchange. We shifted from one forum — in person professional development — to just one other — remote learning. Only the delivery method changed.

I have some bad news. I fully expect the transition to hybrid offices — and the concomitant professional development efforts — to be more challenging than our March 2020 changeover. It is important to realize that the only significant change was the technology.

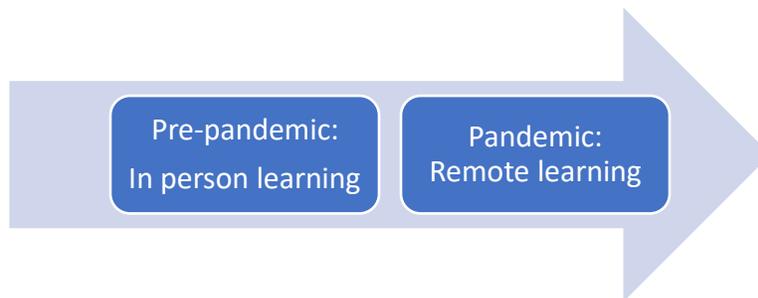


Figure 1: The shift from in person to remote learning necessitated only one change

The forthcoming professional development regimen dictates a shift from one method — remote learning via video — to a dual method — both in person and remote learning. The hurdles are many and complex.

As we begin to emerge from the pandemic, some in need of sharpening their communications skills will be in the office at times while others remain remote. How can you groom your company's spokespeople effectively with this uneven playing field?

You won't find all the answers here. Anyone who claims omniscience is no more accurate than a fortune teller. The aim of this paper will be to:

- Spell out some of the questions smart, forward-looking companies seek to address
- Review some of the findings to date on how to navigate this shift
- Stake a claim to some potential solutions

Most of the focus in this paper is on hands-on professional development opportunities like [media training](#), [presentation skills preparation](#), and [advocacy training](#) since that is the sandbox

in which I play. Though some of the same principles no doubt apply to passive, large group seminars and lectures, they are not the center of attention here.

A few words about words. Here are some key definitions to keep top of mind:

- **In person learning** occurs when participants are all in the same room with each other and with the professional development consultant leading their sessions.
- **Remote learning** (or distance learning) occurs when participants beam in from afar using a video technology such as Skype, Teams, Zoom, or another similar service. I shun the use of the term “virtual” for this type of situation. That word connotes something that is not quite real; I certainly hope that the skill building taking place is very real, and by no means virtual.
- **Hybrid** denotes a synchronous learning environment that includes both in person participants and those attending remotely.

As you read this paper, keep in mind these five steps for communications training in the new and largely untested hybrid environment:

1. Strive as much as possible for equitable learning for both in person and remote participants, whether planning for media training, public speaking preparation, or advocacy efforts.
2. Secure a consultant who has taken time and done the research necessary to think through this new landscape.
3. Engage in frank discussions about your technical and instructional capabilities both internally and with your consultant.
4. Realize that your professional development budget in this area needs to increase due to the need for a larger hybrid training team.
5. Refuse to settle for inferior all-remote sessions; they just don't give you the bang for your buck.

Note that these measures also apply to other professional development programs that require significant interactivity and simulations.

## Phase 2

### Remember How Hard this Was the First Time

I don't know where you were in March 2020 when it became clear the earth was tilting. I had just exited a meeting at the National Press Club. I exited the private conference room to discover a deserted facility. Habitually, the place was bustling by late morning. Yet not a soul was to be found other than the staff. I mean that quite literally — no one.

My first thought was “Holy \$#\*!” Next came “Uh-oh.” Then it occurred to me that I'd best hop on the Metro and get home as quick as possible.

As the next few days unwound and the severity became clear, I thought it best to sit tight for a few weeks until things settled down. Then it looked like the crisis might last a couple of months. Here we sit more than a year later, still relying on video for our human connections. This includes professional development.

The need for remote training programs became clear. I had largely resisted such offerings previously. But the writing was on the wall. We were not going to revert to our long-held concept of normal any time soon, so it is better to get 60 or 70 percent of your professional development needs rather than zero. As I kept telling anyone who asked, these programs are not optimal but we were no longer living and working in an optimal world.

I still believe that. For more than two decades I have relied on the “laying on of hands,” as I like to call it, when it comes to media training, presentation skills workshops, and Congressional testimony preparation. There is no adequate substitute. Yet we've got to play the cards we are dealt. Out of necessity, remote professional development became the default method for executive learning.

The world changed. [No more face-to-face communications training workshops](#). And for good reason. It was irresponsible to conduct in person workshops under pandemic conditions. I will not place clients in that type of health- and life-threatening jeopardy.

Media interviews and business presentations via Skype and Zoom became the order of the day for the foreseeable future. It proved to be an intimidating way of communicating for many

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spokespeople. Observe even to this day the shaky performance in terms of both delivery and technology of many media interview subjects who participate remotely.

## Building Your Own Manual

[“There Is No Playbook’ for How to Do Hybrid Teaching”](#) blares a cautionary *EducationWeek* headline in an opinion column by Larry Ferlazzo. In that editorial, Texas language teacher Gery Moreno says, “Do not assume that the delivery method that worked in person will work virtually. You might not realize that you adjust your teaching pace much more efficiently when in person because you can read the room better. You have to consciously stop and check for understanding much more when you teach virtually.”

This makeshift communications environment served as a reminder that we cannot lose sight of the core principles that must be present in any meaningful communications improvement program. Whether held in person, remote, or hybrid, the emphasis remains on:

- Message development, refinement, and discipline
- Simulated practice rounds that replicate the real thing
- A sustained program that encourages professional development over the long run

As of this paper’s publication date, pandemic restrictions appear to be easing, at least in the United States, though the coronavirus continues to rage elsewhere across the globe. We are not yet out of the woods, so must keep some still unpredictable factors in mind:

- What of international sessions? There may be a yo-yo effect for some time yet. The severity of the virus may ebb in Europe but return with a vengeance in Australia, for example. Or it may again spike unexpectedly in Asia, North America, South America, or anywhere for that matter.
- What happens if the virus comes back for another surge when cold weather returns? That is when the flu is typically most widespread. Might a COVID resurgence mean a return to everyone working from home leading to yet another realignment of how companies approach professional development opportunities?
- What to do with workers who refuse to be vaccinated? Will companies deny them entry into the office, thereby forcing them into remote learning? (and no, I don’t want to lead a session surrounded by a gang of people who choose to risk the health of themselves and, more importantly, others.

## Hybrid Is No Panacea

Perhaps even more scary, the landscape will continue to change in complex and, I am sure, unforeseen ways. It is highly likely given newsroom cost-cutting proclivities, for example, that

Zoom interviews will continue once the pandemic eases. That means companies need a long-term strategy that also addresses the current trend.

If you take nothing else from this research, heed this: Some consultants may try to convince you that these temporary solutions are a suitable long-range substitute. Nonsense. Remote learning is far from ideal when it comes to sharpening communications skills, whether [dealing with the media](#), [delivering presentations](#), or [advocating before policymakers](#).

What happens next? “In a lot of ways it’s going to be more disruptive than when we went all remote,” Brian Kropp, vice president of research at the business research firm Gartner, told *The Washington Post’s* Jena McGregor for her March 30, 2021, article [“The hybrid office is here to stay. The shift could be more disruptive than the move to all-remote work.”](#)

## Phase 3

### New Challenges in Organizing Professional Development Offerings

Consultants leading professional development sessions must become adept with a new technology landscape, practicing with the tools in advance to ensure as few kinks as possible. For instance, how can they stay attuned to nonverbal cues remote participants exhibit while able to scan in person participants more readily for such clues? Keeping remote learners engaged is a still unfolding challenge. Such limitations are bound to add to the consultant's mental challenges and, perhaps, stress levels.



Figure 2: The shift to hybrid learning necessitates multiple adjustments

Of course, not all communications training workshops need to last for hours as is the tradition. This needs to be acknowledged by the company's communications and public affairs officers and consultants alike. It is hard for even the most spirited session leaders to hold any audience's interest for lengthy periods, especially when that audience is remote. Chunking the content can prove effective. Speaker and author [Arnold Sanow](#) offers what he labels "micro-learning" classes to clients — a series of 20-minute video sessions that focus on one key point per call.

#### **This Stuff Is Hard**

Beyond the learning barriers that must be ironed out come some logistical challenges. "Teaching simultaneously to in-person students and virtual students is difficult. These difficulties included camera problems, PowerPoint issues, microphone issues, as well as distractions," writes Christina Lindmeier in her December 17, 2020, dissertation for Minnesota State University Moorhead titled, ["Student Success in Virtual Versus In-Person Learning During a Direct Instruction Math Intervention Course."](#)

The technologies are also evolving. The Zoom of 2021 has new features the previous year's version lacked. Additionally, while the consultant may choose to use Zoom, for instance, what happens when a client is accustomed to Teams and insists on using that platform? The consultant must find a comfort level with an unfamiliar tool.

Now, overlay a dual instructional regimen. Foresee problems, anyone?

Unfortunately, there is little existing research on how this shift will impact corporate professional development. Examinations of schools, however, have taken place, and may provide some insights pertinent to workforce learning.

Expect the hybrid model to be “the most challenging [mode] to teach in and to learn in as a remote participant. It has been found that both the relatedness to peers and the intrinsic motivation is the lowest in the hybrid-virtual setting.” This from a 2020 article in *Computers & Education* Volume 143, [“Learning and instruction in the hybrid virtual classroom: An investigation of students’ engagement and the effect of quizzes”](#) by Annelies Raes, Pieter Vanneste, et al.

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Some organizations are considering a different model they label as hybrid. They hold in person learning sessions, record them, then offer the recorded version later. This is the easy way out and is by no means active learning. It's akin to watching a movie. Viewers might take away some value, but it will not be personalized for them. While

such a scheme may be fine for rote tasks such as learning to fill out a form or use a new app, it is no substitute for sharpening much needed business proficiencies like presentation skills or dealing with the media or policymakers.

## Modern Methods, Same Superior Specifications

Consultants leading communications training workshops must adapt to new instructional methods while preserving high learning standards. Expedia CEO Peter Kern raises an interesting point in a March 19, 2021, [Wall Street Journal article](#). He wonders whether those joining remotely will receive equal learning and career opportunities. He is also concerned that managers not make negative judgments against those not in the office.

This same notion will also be a concern when it comes to professional development opportunities. Thus the concern is not solely will both in person and remote workshop participants have an equal learning experience. The additional concern is will the consultant leading the session and the executive who hires them — and who bears ultimate responsibility

for its success — view remote participants in a less positive light, thus hampering their advancement opportunities?

The consultant’s attitude must also be taken into account. Will they be able to judge participant performance thoroughly and objectively when they teach in person while handling both in person and remote attendees? Consider two scenarios:

1. Your chief communications officer decides that two spokespeople will speak to the press on a critical issue. One participates in the media training workshop in person while the other beams into the same session from afar. It is altogether possible that the communications leader will rely more on the in person individual. What are the ramifications? Spokesperson 1 gains added status both internally and externally, meaning they get higher profile press calls, more invitations to speak at conferences, and greater interest from headhunters. Meanwhile, spokesperson 2 is shunted to the side, losing out on a wide array of professional opportunities.
2. Four up and coming executives are being considered as potential spokespeople. You call in your communications training consultant to lead a media training workshop with the purpose of sorting out who has potential and who is best left to other duties. It is basically an audition to see who moves forward and who lags. Two of your people attend the workshop in person while the others join remotely. Will the in person participants gain an advantage over their remote colleagues, thus giving them a leg up on their careers? As in the first scenario, the career implications are very real and highly significant, as are the implications for the business.

## Playing to Two Distinct Audiences

Veteran Philadelphia-area elementary school teacher Delaine Jones, speaking to Philadelphia NPR outlet [WHYY](#), says, “It was just hard to engage both groups when I was looking online, and looking at the students next to me. They weren’t able to communicate in small groups like they did before,” admitting, “It just didn’t feel good to me, as a teacher.”

Remote learning calls for instructors to take a slower pace and repeat key points more often. This minimizes the value to those present in the room, perhaps leading to frustration, daydreaming, and ultimately missing key ideas.

**Consultants leading communications training workshops must adapt to new instructional methods while preserving high learning standards.**

In the paper [“A systematic literature review on synchronous hybrid learning: gaps identified,”](#) Annelies Raes, A., Detienne, L., Windey, I. et al. note “remote students still felt excluded from the chief class, because they were physically separated from the on-site class, especially when the remote class encounters technical difficulties without immediate support. Meanwhile, on-

site students can feel neglected when a teacher spent much time solving the technical problems.”

Raes also reports in the same paper that “both students and teachers state that remote students learned less, were generally more passive and often behaved like they were watching TV and not attending a lesson.” It can also lead to frustration when they are ignored when trying to respond to a question or get involved in a discussion.

## Phase 4

### New Challenges for Your Workforce

Professional learning is going to be more complex for the learner as well as the business and the instructor. Let us take the example of a media training workshop for two of your top executives. Your COO is on site. Your CFO joins remotely. It's no surprise that the CFO likely gets the short end of the stick. What are the true implications? A corporate message that is spread haltingly and ineffectively to the financial community, and a CFO who gains little respect from peers, both internal and external.

Meanwhile, your COO hits the ball out of the park every time they conduct a media interview, meet with various stakeholders, and share ideas with others in the C-suite. Might this inequality eventually cause some friction among your leadership, resulting in a less than stellar performance from top management?

Phased reopening of offices is ripe for logistical nightmares. Set aside the notion of smaller spaces, necessitating the sharing of offices and desks. How do you manage to communicate completely and coherently under such a regimen?

One colleague tried hybrid learning well before the pandemic struck. She used an app everyone typed into whether they were joining in person or remotely. Her observation was that those in the room suffered. They actually talked less since they were so focused on writing their remarks in the app rather than sharing thoughts verbally.

**I shun the use of the term “virtual” when discussing remote learning. That word connotes something that is not quite real; I certainly hope that the skill building taking place is very real, and by no means virtual.**

Other considerations: Will continuously evolving safety guidelines ease workers' fears? When will those who fear for their health or that of their loved ones — or who have simply gotten into a better groove working from home — feel comfortable returning to the office? Will some try to use safety as an excuse to avoid in person learning?

Under a hybrid professional development regime, will there be divides among gender, resource, racial, or other lines that lead to inferior learning experiences for certain parts of the working population? We have certainly witnessed such barriers with school children. Leaders and consultants must stay alert to such potential disparities so as not to jeopardize remote participants' opportunities for advancement, higher pay, and greater prestige.

## Phase 5

### Where Do We Go from Here?

[EdSurge](#) cites Dallas Independent School District Director of Personalized Learning Kristen Watkins posing the million-dollar question, “How might we design learning experiences so that students in any environment get equitable learning opportunities?” That is also the challenge for corporate professional development endeavors in a post-pandemic world.

The previously cited article in [The Wall Street Journal](#) cites a Prudential executive who “insisted on adding video capacity in more small meeting spaces, not just conference rooms, so people working from home won’t feel excluded.” While the motivation may be noble, the end result, as it pertains to professional development, is not promising for it augurs a default to hybrid learning. Default preferences in any professional development effort are a bad idea.

The article also reads, “executives say it would be easier to manage if every employee returned to an office, or all stayed remote.” It certainly would make professional development more straightforward. It’s a nice thought but, knowing what we know about companies’ and workers’ dim views of returning to the office 100 percent of the time, it’s not going to happen any time soon.

#### Not an Excuse to Go Cheap

I can guarantee that some companies will try to get by on the cheap, using now-familiar remote technologies like Zoom as an excuse to lower their professional development expenditures, thereby downgrading the effectiveness of those programs.

Which leads us to an issue clients do not want to hear: Budget hikes. Companies should not anticipate a drop in the professional fees they pay. Why?

- You are now expecting your consultant to have familiarity with a range of video services.
- They must know how to use them both from an instructional and a technical point of view.
- If the consultant needs to get up to speed on a new platform you choose to use, that adds to their preparations and your budget.
- They are carrying a more intricate workload during the session and conducting extra preparation in advance.
- They will be charged with handling two disparate audiences, one in person and one remote. Two for the price of one? A nice deal if you can get it, but think of it this way: How often do you buy anything from a gallon of milk to a new car and get a two for one arrangement?

- Hybrid trainings demand three or four consultants (more detail on this in a moment).

## Help Wanted: Technical Operator

This heralds the need for another actor: A technology operator. This specialist takes on such duties as:

- Monitoring audio levels from distant participants
- Gauging video connectivity
- Recording and playing back simulations of remote participants, and having the ability to pause and restart during critiques
- Paying attention to comments and questions arriving in the chat box
- Keeping an eye open for remote participants who want to raise a question or contribute a thought
- Managing any slides, videos, or graphics the consultant plans to use
- Posting quizzes and other notes the instructor may want to share with those connecting remotely

**Smart consultants who focus on bottom line outcomes will make a technical operator mandatory. It truly is essential to a hybrid learning project.**

Troubleshooting these issues frees the main instructor to keep their eye on the learning ball. As part of the game plan, consultants should ask clients how they want the operator to handle certain matters that may crop up when, as an example, the connection with remote learners freezes (don't tell

me you have never witnessed that on a Zoom call):

- How are the consultants and the participants to deal with this?
- Do you forge ahead with only the in person individual(s) gaining benefit?
- How can you contact remote participants by email or text when their connections fizzle?
- Do you wait it out hoping for things to clear up, thereby boring your in person cohort?

The chief consultant should maintain a roster of technical operators they feel comfortable working with. It is essential that they know each other's moves so that they are able to seamlessly move the workshop along. Any consultant worth their salt will have a stable of such operators.

Where to look for such a specialist? Seek out individuals with a mesh of talents:

- A basic understanding of your issues
- Familiarity with the substance of your training
- Working knowledge of what you are trying to achieve during the session
- A grasp of the primary learning objectives
- Knowing which questions from the chat box prove most relevant

The consultant should also offer a checklist for operators. This list indicates what operators need to know. Some examples:

- Do they need to be facile with all video services or only one?
- What are the specific expectations of them?
- When are they expected to chime in with participant questions and comments?
- Do you expect them to participate vocally or via the chat box?
- Should they plan to appear on screen or not?
- If they do appear on the video feed, what type of video background should they display?

## Sharing the Responsibilities

In a hybrid regime, it may sometimes be beneficial to utilize one training consultant for the in person group and a second for those in the remote cluster. Each segment holds discussions and participates in simulations separately, then reassembles to discuss their experiences, key learning moments, best practices, and the like. Granted, this would not lead to consistent learning, though it would sidestep any second class feeling on the part of participants.

I do not recommend this method as a first choice for active learning. However, for larger groups in a seminar-like setting, it may represent a somewhat satisfactory fallback position. Companies choosing this approach need to recognize the budget implications of utilizing two experienced consultants as well as a technical operator.

**Another critical consideration for future professional development programs: Will your consultant be up to speed?**

Note that this expands the size of your professional development consulting lineup. And we're not done yet.

In the past, this team consisted of two people — the consultant and a videographer responsible for recording and playing back all interactive media training, presentation skills, or advocacy workshop exercises.

Videographers remain essential players, and they can expect to assume even more complex duties. They will need to adjust to a new environment, deciding how to record and play back simulations by both in person and remote participants.

Adding it all up, you are looking at a three or four person hybrid professional development lineup consisting of:

- One or two training consultants (dependent on the number of participants); one for in person attendees, the other for the remote cadre
- Videographer
- Technical operator

Clearly, this portends new complexities. Those individuals must be able to collaborate from the get-go in order to give you the learning environment your spokespeople deserve.

Bear in mind that your media training consultant is not a technician. Their expertise resides in messaging and communication skills. That's why the pros, when leading in person workshops, work with experienced videographers. Running a camera or the mechanical aspects of an online session is not at the top of their skill set, nor should it be.

**In the hybrid format, you are looking at a four person professional development lineup consisting of:**

- **Two training consultants; one for in person attendees, the other for the remote cadre**
- **Videographer**
- **Technical operator**

## **Candidates to Fit the Bill**

Where can consultants turn to locate a qualified operator? Here's an example. My expertise is in communications and public affairs, so I would look to people with backgrounds such as:

- A government relations staffer who has proven comfortable with video technology
- The communications professional with a reputation for reacting quickly and calmly under fire
- An administrative person who has an understanding of both the content and the technology

The point is you need someone who, while not necessarily a top expert in either the issue or the video platform, has enough of a background in both areas to get the job done.

Smart consultants who focus on bottom line outcomes will make the operator mandatory. It truly is essential to a hybrid learning project. If the client balks, veteran consultants know that they are in position to walk away from the business if they foresee it will result in an inferior, unacceptable outcome that will cause frustration for the client and ding the consultant's reputation.

## The Consultant's Responsibility

Another critical consideration for future professional development programs: Will your consultant be up to speed? Will they have thought through what it takes to succeed as best as possible?

What novel methods might consultants employ? In the [Computers & Education](#) article referenced earlier, Raes et. al. write, “quizzes and polls have proven to be an effective educational tool as students attended more classes, paid more attention, and were more engaged,” and that “students were unequivocal that the use of quizzes and polls presented a good way for them to become more involved and interact within lectures.” While it is hoped that few communications training consultants turn to lectures, it is logical to deduce that these findings might also apply to interactive small group workshops.

**Veteran consultants know that they are in position to walk away from the business if they foresee it will result in an inferior, unacceptable outcome that will cause frustration for the client and ding the consultant's reputation.**

When a larger group is involved, a hybrid system using breakout rooms could match in person and remote attendees. This would lead to a higher degree of interactivity for everyone concerned, and forge tighter bonds between the two groups.

Other issues remain that require sorting out between the consultant and client. There are likely to be different answers for different situations:

- Is one large screen in the typical conference room sufficient to connect the in person learners with those who are remote?
- Or will the corporate post-pandemic office revamp include individual screens for everyone in the room?
- Do you need to institute digital white boards visible to those tuning in from afar so that everyone can see the same thing?

## Phase 6

### Take Action Now

Strap yourself in for what promises to be a rough ride for at least the immediate future. As time passes and conditions evolve, the problem of attaining quality professional development for those engaged in communications and public affairs will become clearer. One of three things will happen:

1. Businesses and the consultants who advise them will adapt, developing a regimen capable of offering hybrid professional development programs that hit the desired mark.
2. Vaccines, the wearing of masks, physical distancing, and other health and safety measures take hold, leaving us in a world we recognize, at least for the most part, as pre-pandemic, permitting a return to in person programs.
3. In the darkest of scenarios, a resurgence of the coronavirus or the onset of another unrelated crisis grips the globe, forcing a continued reliance on remote learning. This is far from an unlikely scenario given new virus variants and the possibility of infections creeping across borders from heavily stricken countries.

**I encourage you to contact me with lessons you experience so that we might add to the research, share your examples with others, and assist you in the transition. Just don't wait too long or you'll find your company lagging behind the competition.**

Smart companies will plan as best they can for each of these situations, working to ensure their leaders receive similar professional development opportunities whether participating in person or remotely. Firms that neglect to heed the coming changes can be expected to stumble and fall by the wayside.

Looking at it this way, the new environment opens the door to possibilities for companies that stay ahead of the curve. If competitors fail to adapt, that means growth for the superior business firm. Hiring processes could emphasize the quality of professional development offerings, making the company more attractive in a competitive workforce situation. Retention also becomes less of a challenge.

How do you position yours as one of the smart, surviving companies? Follow these steps:

- Initiate internal conversations about the upcoming changes. Your CEO must be involved. Your entire executive team needs to see that these changes have a stamp of approval from the very top.
- Ensure a level playing field as much as possible when you engage in hybrid professional development. Strive for an equitable learning process that avoids bias against one group or the other.

- Involve every department that offers professional development. Recognize that the responsibility for success rests with executives in those specialties, be they communications, public affairs, finance, technology, etc. Never cede decisions for professional development to another group. They have little idea what you really need.
- Examine your technological capabilities. Be ruthlessly frank. Are you truly set up to offer hybrid learning or do you have some work yet to do?
- Assign someone within your company to get the consultant's technical operator up to speed on the specifics of your system. Identify this person (or people) now.
- Refuse to settle for lazy learning approaches, such as recording a session then offering the recording as an equal value. Businesses that truly care about their leaders' advancement must insist on active, synchronous professional development.
- Begin to secure consultants who have this big picture in mind. Some will have given this much thought; others will be lost at sea. You will put yourself ahead in the game if you lock in retainer arrangements now.

The key points to remember in the months — and perhaps years — ahead:

- The challenge of getting spokespeople up to par is going to get harder.
- The onset of the pandemic in March 2020 necessitated only one change — a shift from in person professional development to remote.
- The transition as we emerge from the pandemic is going to be double the challenge.
- The time to prepare for the onset of hybrid professional development is now; tomorrow is too late.

Businesses that succeed — businesses with strong, forward-looking leadership — will adjust to the hybrid learning model. They even stand to thrive given that plenty of competitors — and the consultants who advise them — are either blissfully unaware of or will wantonly ignore the alarm bells already sounding.

How can we help you and your company overcome these hurdles? There's only one way to find out. Get in touch [by email](#) or call (703) 533-0403.

## Research Recommendations

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Any errors that may remain and the opinions expressed herein are mine and mine alone.

## About the Author

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Ed Barks is a communications strategy consultant and author. His corporate and association clients hire him to provide them with the messages and everyday communications skills their executives need.

He shows them how to gain an enhanced reputation, greater confidence, added opportunities for career advancement, and realization of long-term business and public policy goals.



Ed is the author of [three books for communications and government relations experts](#), and for executives who represent the public face of their companies:

- *Reporters Don't Hate You: 100+ Amazing Media Relations Strategies*
- *A+ Strategies for C-Suite Communications: Turning Today's Leaders into Tomorrow's Influencers*
- *The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations*

Clients who turn to him for strategic advice say he “knows how to elicit peak performance.” They call him “a master at connecting with his audience” and “an effective educator,” and give his counsel “two thumbs up!”

As President of Barks Communications since its founding in 1997, Ed has guided more than 5500 business leaders, association executives, thought leaders, and communications and government relations professionals toward a sharper message and enhanced communications skills.

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Keep up with the latest news from Ed when you join his *Communications Community* at [www.barkscomm.com](http://www.barkscomm.com).

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