

Transcript: Restricted technology and budgets - no barrier to digital learning

1) Title slide: Introduction

I'm Zahra and I'm a Digital Learning Partner at Southwark Council.

This is going to be a case study presentation talking about some of the L&D and wider challenges that Southwark Council has faced over the last few months and our approach to them.

And normally case study presentations take place after the event. Everything has gone great. It's been a huge success story. However, some of you may have noticed that we are still in the middle of a **pandemic**... It's not over yet. This is not a finished story, but this is our journey so far.

And I really wanted to make this an opportunity for us all to share and learn from each other. So I'm going to be sharing Southwark's experience and would love to hear from you about your experiences so feel free, as Michelle said, to type in the chat box and there will be questions throughout.

2) QUESTION 1

So let's get started. The first thing I want to ask is...

"What L&D challenges has your organisation faced during the COVID-19 pandemic?"

We've faced many of these challenges too. I'm definitely seeing a lot of similarities. And I'll be talking about some of the challenges we faced and our response to them so hopefully you'll get some useful takeaways this but first...

3) Southwark Council

I need to introduce you to Southwark Council. Southwark is an Inner-London borough with over 300,000 (three hundred thousand) residents and around 4000 staff covering 60 different services to support our residents and businesses across the borough. Southwark is one of the most diverse boroughs in the world and our workforce reflects that.

And as a public sector organisation, we don't have huge budgets but we do have a huge responsibility to respect and make the most of tax-payers money. Any investments are exactly that. It's about making the services we offer the best for our residents.

4) Smart Working

The project I'm working on is the Smart Working programme. This is a Council-wide transformation project aimed enabling new, more efficient ways of working which will ultimately improve services for our residents.

Technology is one element of this programme involving the rolling out of Window 10 laptops and updating our IT systems. The other two areas are Workskills & Culture and Workplace because although you can introduce new technology, without addressing the skills, culture and environment it will all fall flat so are taking a very rounded approach to enabling this transformation.

My role focuses around the training offer for this programme which includes everything from digital wellbeing and managing remote working as well as the practical use of the applications.

Ok so, great we have a project which will enable more people to work from home. And are now faced with the biggest working from home shift the world has ever seen. Perfect timing!

Well, the Smart Working Programme was a one-year project and two weeks in...

5) Lockdown happened

Lockdown happened.

“Stay home, Protect the NHS, Save lives”. This was the message from the UK government. “Work from home if you can”.

Like all local councils, we offer key services to our residents covering everything from housing support, to social services and public health. It wasn't an option for us to just put our services on hold or stop working. We need to be able to keep working and providing essential services from wherever we were.

And this was a huge period of uncertainty for all of us. Then add to this everyone's personal circumstances from shielding to home schooling.

And just under half of our staff are Black, Asian or other Ethnic Minority groups, evidences has shown these groups have been the hardest hit during the coronavirus pandemic in the UK, so not only are we working hard to support our community which are statistically likely to be the worst effected, our staff are statistically more likely to feel the worst impacts of the virus as well.

And we know we have staff and residents that have been very badly affected by this. This was very real for us, not numbers at a daily press conference. These are real people, colleagues, family and friends.

6) What do we do?

So what do we do? Lockdown changed everything. This is all new for everyone. How do we support our residents and our staff through this?

7) Nice Working From Home

Well, it's simple, everyone grabs their laptops and starts working from their home office. Perfect! Oh no wait...

8) Reality 1

Reality. Because this was the reality for a lot of people.

Does anyone recognise this?

9) Reality 2

Or maybe this was your reality. Kids, family and pets. People working from kitchens, beds, sofas. Anywhere. And from any device. And let's not forget all the connection issues.

Because this wasn't working from home. This was getting through a pandemic from home.

But as the public sector not only do we need to support our staff through this pandemic, we also have a duty to support thousands of residents through this as well.

10) Agenda

And this is how L&D and Smart Working has played its role over the last few months supporting our staff, to support our residents.

I'm going to break this down into three areas:

- The technology
- The people
- The culture

11) TECHNOLOGY

12) Technology – Situation

Working from home – meet Southwark Council.

Safe to say we are not the most up to date when it comes to technology. And this is something shared across many public sector organisations. We are a very desk-based, in-person kind of place so although some staff have portable work devices, the majority are not issued laptops by default. So this was a new way of working for most staff at Southwark.

Working from home largely meant remote working on your own laptop. But not everyone has a laptop at home or if they do, it might not be an up to date laptop. I mean, I know I didn't. But old technology can be very difficult to use, incompatible and inefficient so it's not a really a long term solution. And it was became clear early on that the lockdown was not going to be over in a few weeks.

Then add to this that we didn't actually have any method for people to communicate remotely. Everyone normally just uses email, phone or talk face to face. And our outdated technology set up didn't support webcams and microphones so video calling wasn't possible even if we wanted to.

The lack of modern technology was a major barrier for effectively working from home but ...

13) The technology – Approach

The Smart Working Programme actually put us in a much better position than many other organisations. Although we didn't have the laptops already handed out to all staff members, we did have small stock already available, we had some budget approved and had done a lot of the prep work.

This meant we were quickly able to get emergency laptops couriered out to key workers and staff who would otherwise unable to work effectively or at all.

The Smart Working Team also managed to roll out Microsoft Teams to all staff in 3 days. Our remote working set up still doesn't support webcam and microphones so staff do have to access Teams outside this of the remote working environment but having Teams has been key in enabling our staff to keep communicating, collaborating and learning from home during this pandemic.

14) Technology - QUESTION

15) PEOPLE

16) The People – Varied Digital Skills

The digital skill levels at Southwark are very varied. We have some staff who can just pick up a laptop and go, we have other that would need support with how to turn it on. And we need to be able cater for all these needs.

Some people have previously put off learning new digital skills as they didn't really need to to carry out their roles. But lockdown changed all that, you had to now learn new skills to be able to continue working.

And staff were now using a range of different work and personal devices. For the Smart Working programme, we knew exactly what devices people would be using. So all of our learning content was geared toward Windows 10 laptops and there was very little content for any other devices.

Our technology set up has prevented the full configuration of Microsoft Teams so we couldn't just curate or find existing content from other sources because our version of Teams just doesn't work like that. But what we did need to do was to support our staff urgently to enable them to keep meeting remotely.

17) The People – Varied Digital Skills – Approach

Just before lockdown, as part of the Smart Working programme, we had launched our Digital Skills Portal. This was a section on our LMS focusing on supporting staff covering a wide range of digital skills – from wellbeing and security to collaboration and applications.

Here you can see the views on the Digital Skills Portal 2 weeks before lockdown, which was at 6 views. And then the week before lockdown, this jumps up to 200. Over the first couple of weeks, 20% of our office-based staff had accessed the Digital Skills Portal. Which is great -

, people are looking for self-service support in the right place but there was also a massive peak in queries we were receiving. Although we had some resources on the Portal, these didn't meet the needs as they weren't designed for the new situation we had found ourselves in and the devices people were using. And creating new content does take time, which we didn't have.

So, just before lockdown officially started we started offering daily live virtual sessions to meet the learning need for Microsoft Teams training and running Live Q&A sessions.

Live sessions were quicker to start running and also give staff a chance to ask questions, realise they are not the only ones with questions and get more direct support. We knew there was a lot of nervousness from some staff, this was a massive change so we wanted to ensure they were closely supported. And it wasn't a perfectly polished course. But it did meet the urgent, instant need. And we were then able to improve and update as needed which is an ongoing process based on feedback and changes.

In between, we also started also started creating content to cover wider range of devices. Due to our old infrastructure, it wasn't possible to simply source learning content direct from Microsoft so we had to create our own from scratch and quickly. We used existing software we had, built-in tools and freely available tools which enabled us to expand our content creation capacity.

We created a mix of videos, guides and infographics that were hosted on our Digital Skills Portal. Although some of the tools we were using were not the most advanced, they did enable us to create a variety of content without increasing our costs.

We also had senior leaders attend sessions and access content themselves. Each senior leader at Southwark has a weekly email blog. And having senior leaders choosing to write about joining sessions, accessing content and using the new technology was really helpful for in terms of promoting the support available and championing the change.

Since May, the Digital Skills Portal views have averaged out to 100 a week but the queries around Teams have significantly dropped showing the learning and support has been helping people.

We have also seen an increase in access across our wider learning programme - especially in our personal learning offer showing that staff have been actively opting in to the available digital learning opportunities.

18) The People - Situation - Wellbeing

But we were still in a pandemic. It's one thing supporting your staff to practically keep working, but this means nothing if you ignore their wellbeing.

This has been a stressful time for many, especially the first month or two, which were filled with uncertainty and anxiety.

And at Southwark, we know it's been an especially difficult time for some staff personally affected by loss and by the long term effects of the virus. So it has been and will continue to be a key priority to support our staff's mental health and wellbeing.

19) The People - Approach - Wellbeing

Working alongside HR, Organisation Transformation and other teams across the Council, we have launched a range of content as part of our holistic approach to supporting staff during the pandemic.

Some of content was new, recognising the uniqueness of the situation we are in. But other content was able to be sourced from existing resources internally and externally which has helped us to save time and cost.

We've also started offering a series mental health and wellbeing webinars and smaller group sessions covering a range of topics to help staff support themselves, their colleagues and their team.

Organisation Transformation have started doing regular wellbeing surveys. These have enable us to gain a quick insight into the feelings across the organisation. So we've been able to quickly adapt, flex and meet the changing needs of staff. Which has helped our approach be more responsive and timely.

In all of this, it's been important as an organisation to be able to recognise, empathise and connect with the human. Our senior leaders and managers have been great at helping open up discussions. They've been actively using their weekly blogs and team meetings to highlight the importance of wellbeing and share their own and others experiences and tips.

20) The People – QUESTION

21) CULTURE

22) The Culture – Situation

For some at Southwark, the default position is - We meet in person, we learn in person. Digital is second best.

And when you think about digital learning: these are some of the words that you might have heard before. Boring, not engaging. But actually at Southwark...

23) The Culture – Situation

, this wasn't everyone. Yeah, there are some people do feel this way. Opinions and perceptions were quite varied. But overall, we actually had a lot of people really wanting more digital learning and transformation. They see what's happening in other organisations, see the potential and want Southwark to be able to move forward with this.

For the past few years, Southwark has taken a 70-20-10 approach to learning. Which means we recognise that effective learning needs a mixture of learning from doing, and learning from others as well as formal learning. But in this, staff and L&D have been limited to apply the 70-20-10 approach digitally as well as face-to-face due to our technology limitations.

So before this pandemic we had a variety of opinions toward digital learning, some very open to it. Some very reluctant.

24) The Culture - Approach

But since lockdown, this is what we've found overall. It's not 100% and we wouldn't expect it to be, but even from those previously reluctant, there has been a real shift and openness towards digital learning. Staff are finding digital learning helpful, engaging, feeling connected.

People are still learning how to use everything, but are actively choosing to explore new features and share tips. We've seen an increase in people want to find out what more they can now do. How best they can use the new technology and resources? But not everything is working fully yet for us, so if anything we've actually had to manage expectations. But this does show people are interested in maximising these tools and exploring how best they can be used for every day work, learning and in our services.

25) The Culture – QUESTION

26) The Future

So what does the future of learning look like at Southwark?

27) The Future – Toolkit (13:55)

The future is exciting. We are still in a pandemic and we know things are unlikely to return to normal before the end of the year. But lockdown has enabled us to widen our learning toolkit. Previously, we've only really been able to offer face-to-face courses and e-learning. Other digital learning options weren't tools we could really use.

We're not going to ever be 100% digital and we wouldn't want to be. That's wouldn't be suitable or the best solution. But we are now in a position to expand our 70:20:10 approach digitally and have wider blended learning offer.

Using digital options will also enable us to open up more learning to the whole Council. We have many offices and locations spread across the borough but most short learning and network events only ever happen at our main office. This could mean for some staff travelling up to an hour, just to attend a 1 or 2-hour events. Now in future, we can enable them to access shorter learning events remotely wherever they are based. And this shouldn't be a second best experience. This needs to be done carefully to ensure people joining remotely are included and engaged, but done well can lead to better inclusion, time savings and cost savings.

Some forms of digital learning are also quick to turn around, which means we can be more dynamic, flexible and respond to new needs and changes as needed in a timely manner. Whilst other areas of digital learning may enable more on-demand content will make it easier for staff to direct their own learning in their own time.

We know moving forward that staff will now have the right technology, skills and support to be able to access more digital learning. And there's a growing appetite toward digital because...

28) The Future – Rocket

Lockdown has accelerated digital transformation in many ways. The disruption has enabled and forced us to achieve a lot in a short space of time, but this was under intense and unusual circumstances. There has been no choice over the last few months but to use digital learning. And this isn't going to be the situation permanently. One day we will meet face to face again.

And then people will have the choice again whether to continue accessing and offering digital learning. And we want to have choice, we want to be able to select the best method for the learning need, taking into account cost, quality and impact - and sometime best option will be in-person face-to-face but now there's scope for a more digitally blended approach.

Over the last few months there have been a lot of rushed quick fixes to address the urgent needs. What is good in a lockdown urgent situation, won't necessarily be good in the long term. Now we've started re-evaluating and improving these, making the most of the new technology and the expectations people now have for digital learning.

As the technology we have available continues to update, especially over the next 6 months, this will open up even more possibilities for what we can do digitally so we will need to continually evaluate and improve.

The next 6 months will be key in normalising digital learning as a genuine option. As L&D professionals, we really need to be thinking about making the most of this opportunity because you might not get another chance.

Finally, mental health and wellbeing will continue to be a key priority for us. That's not going to change. But we are expecting our budget will be lower next year as we head into the recession. Thinking back to the last recession in 2009, the budget cuts meant learning cuts. There wasn't the option of 'let's explore how digital can prevent cuts'. Now we are heading into a lower budget, but with more tools to help us maintain this momentum.

29) The Future – QUESTION

30) Key Takeaway

So what have we taken away from this experience? Firstly...

- **It is possible**

There was some doubt, some preconceptions both from staff and the organisation. But people have proven it is possible both to us and to themselves. It is possible to meet and learn online. We can do this.

- **It's worth it**

It is worth investing in digital - both in terms of the technology and learning. Although it's a big initial investment, the long term gains will be bigger. And there are a lot of existing tools you probably already have access to and range of free and low cost tools available.

- **It's open**

The right technology and support opens up more learning to more people. Digital doesn't need to mean second-best, you can take part in digital learning and have an interactive and engaging experience no matter where you are located.

- **It's long term**

This pandemic will eventually end, but digital learning doesn't need to. We've proven we can do it, but now make sure you do it well or people will revert back. Improve the quick fixes and incorporating more digital options into our 70-20-10 approach so digital learning can be seen as a genuine option in the long term, where suitable.

- **We can do more**

This pandemic will impact budgets, but now we have digital as a real option so where we may have previously had to simply cut courses, we can now use digital learning to help us offer alternatives and potentially offer more instead of less.

Because now with the technology, skills and culture in place, we can do more, it is possible and will help us improve services for our residents.

31) Q&A

As I'm going through the questions, please add any comments in the chat box if you have any tips or comments so we can continue learning and sharing with each other.

32) Join me tomorrow

I'm also speaking tomorrow

And let's stay connected