

DUARTE

Transformative Soft Skills and Training to Build the Teams of Tomorrow

2020 Research Report

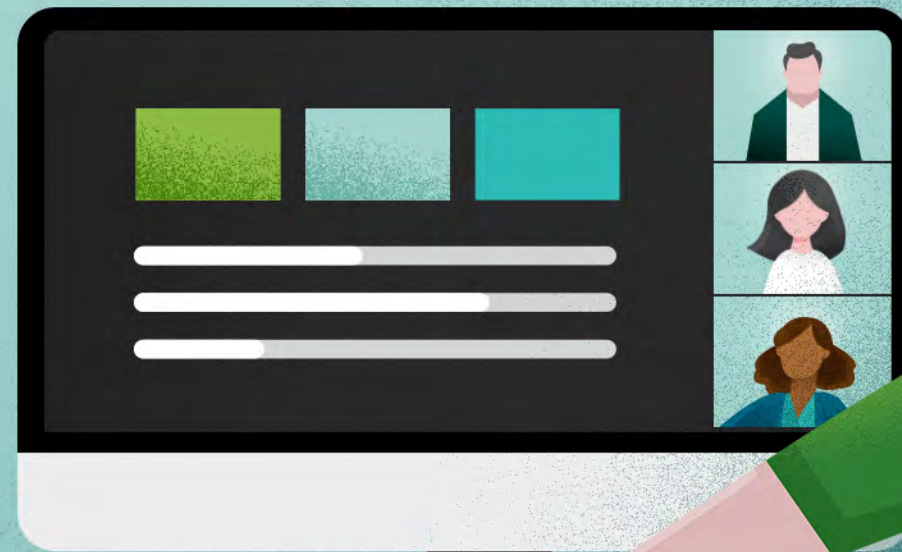


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Are communication and storytelling as valuable as we thought they were?

Read on to learn how our research, conducted during the summer and fall of 2020, suggests that soft skills and training are more essential than ever, and learn what else is in store for 2021.

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Introduction

COVID-19 has proven¹ to be one of the biggest challenges facing the world in modern times, having a profound impact on global health, workforces and economies, communication, and daily life.

In fact, COVID-19 has forced many businesses to reframe their goals, communicate new strategies clearly, and transform faster than ever.

Members of the learning and development (L&D) community have felt these pressures acutely as they race to upskill or reskill workers to meet the challenges of the moment. As specialists of storytelling and communication training, we wanted to learn how other training leaders are navigating this new terrain and how the role of communication has changed to meet new demands.

Source: 1. World Economic Forum ([link](#))

Executive Summary

COVID-19 has negatively impacted many businesses, but there is room for optimism.

Organizations and workers around the world have suffered due to COVID-19. So, it's understandable that for our survey participants, the top two business priorities were retaining customers and employees and driving up revenue to ensure business survival. However, some respondents noted that they are seeing signs of growth and recovery, providing hope.

Changes and uncertainties brought on by 2020 solidified the importance of communication. The transition online for workers and learners increased the importance of frequent and timely virtual communication, as well as listening and empathy. Communication has increased connectivity, reduced uncertainty, increased the safety of remote workers, and facilitated problem-solving and innovation in a physically isolated world.

Soft skills are important to the daily performance of organizations.

Given life's current unpredictability, it's no surprise that respondents rated adaptability, communication, and collaboration as the top three soft skills required by employees. Soft skills were also rated as very important to the daily performance of an organization. The top-rated soft skills were: Virtual communication, listening and empathetic communication, and using various communication mediums effectively. Participants clearly understand how vital these skills are to their organizational health.

The L&D industry is transforming to meet demand online.

In our findings, in-person training showed a sharp decline in 2020. While live virtual training rated most preferred this year, moving forward most respondents want a blended/hybrid option. So, it comes as no surprise that when choosing a training vendor, participants rated two key factors as very important—engaging content and skilled facilitators—which help improve learning outcomes for virtual training.

Respondent Information

During the summer and fall of 2020, we asked L&D professionals and those-interested in soft skills training worldwide to participate in our 2020 Research Report online survey.

Survey respondents came from a variety of industries with the majority falling under educational services (33%) and professional/scientific/tech services (19%). Organizational roles varied from directors/managers (43%), to associates/staff (28%), as well as president/owner/chairperson or CEO (19%). Small businesses (<1,000 employees) represented the majority (59%), with the remainder identifying as working for larger organizations (>1,000 employees). Most respondents were from North America (66%), though regions participating also included South America, Asia, Africa, Caribbean, Central America, Europe, Middle East, and Oceania.



“What does communication mean to you?”

The majority of responses fell into two camps.



Transactional communication is the exchange of ideas between two or more persons. Inherent within its definition is an appreciation for the audience, the context of the communication setting, and the goal of shared meaning.



Dissemination is more of a one-way flow of information in which information is shared from one party to another.

Taking a closer look, responses also varied in focus and function.

Some defined communication very generally, while others grounded it within workplace situations or framed it in the context of relationships. Yet, the most frequently used word was information, signaling that **for many people the core purpose of communication is simply to inform.** It's a device for sharing ideas, learning from others, forming connections, and even creating shared meaning.

This report is a deep dive into the importance of soft skills and communication, providing insights so that organizations can build and sustain momentum into the future.



"What does communication mean to you?"

"People connecting with each other in ways that are meaningful and supportive in order to share information, improve relationships and lead to positive outcomes."

"The ability to disseminate information effectively and engagingly using multiple platforms so a message is clearly understood uniformly."

"Everything verbal and nonverbal that conveys meaning and messaging to another, whether intentional or unintentional."

"The ability to deliver messages to reach common understanding."

"Effectively transferring ideas between minds."

"Communication is the bridge between individual states of being. Without it we can't have the relationships or information necessary to get things done effectively."

"Transmission of a message, be it a feeling, idea, or vision, clearly and understandably that resonates with the listener and achieves the goal that the speaker intended."

COVID-19 Impacts

COVID-19 hit businesses hard, but many report they are showing signs of recovery, and prioritizing retention as well as driving up revenue and profits.

2020 has proven to be a very difficult year. Over the course of the year, COVID-19 killed more than 1 million people globally¹, it may have impacted the US GDP more than the Great Depression², and it slid the world into a global recession¹. Unemployment and underemployment have seen all time highs³, many small businesses have closed⁴, and economies around the world have experienced sharp declines^{1,5}. The effects of COVID-19 will be long-lasting but there is hope on the horizon.

Our research found that even in 2020, many organizations focused on retention and driving up profits and were able to recover and resume normal operations. Outside research also suggests that economic activity should recover in 2021^{1,5}.

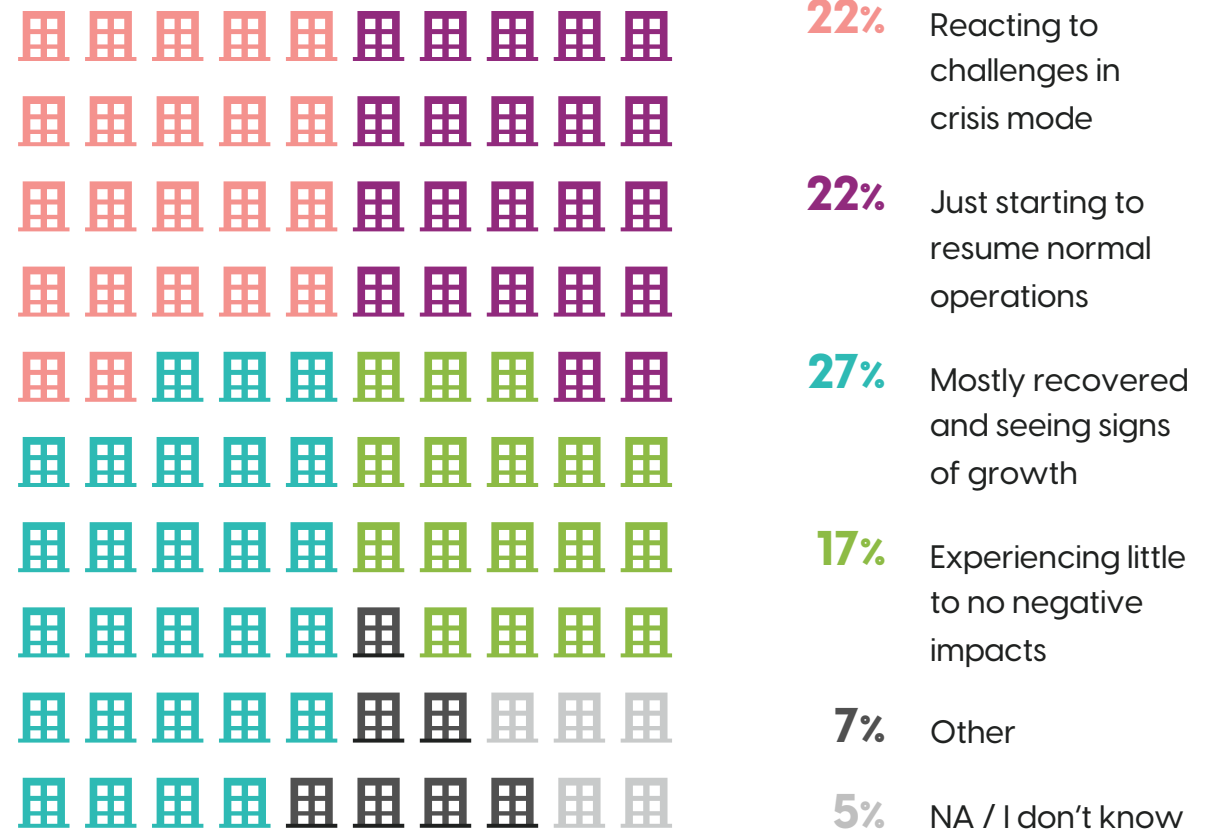
Source: 1. International Monetary Fund ([link](#)); 2. McKinsey ([link](#)); 3. Congressional Research Service ([link](#)); 4. World Economic Forum ([link](#)); 5. OECD ([link](#))

Organizational Responses

While businesses struggled during COVID-19, many are resuming normal operations and returning to growth.

During 2020, U. S. businesses took a dire hit due to COVID-19 with thousands of businesses temporarily and permanently closing¹, others cut back on their workforces, and many surviving companies took financial hits with decreased revenue².

Our data shows that many organizations were impacted, but also that many have been able to navigate the pandemic and are recovering and seeing signs of growth.



Organizational Priorities

During 2020, organizations prioritized retention, revenue, and profits.

In times of crisis, it is important to shore up one's foundation, which was clearly the focus for our survey respondents. In the case of COVID-19, this meant retaining top talent, clients, and customers. Also, when the economy is flailing, it is natural to prioritize driving up revenue and profit.

Scale of importance

0

10

8.04 Increasing retention

7.52 Driving up revenue/profit

7.15 Growing market share

6.94 Minimizing risks

6.40 Cutting costs

6.33 Reducing time to market

Communication Skills Importance

Most respondents said that communication skills are as important or more important now.

In fact, none said communication skills are less important. Even for those who said there was no change, when asked to identify in their own words how COVID-19 impacted the importance of communication skills at their organization, many shared that communication was in fact VERY important.



“At crisis time, communication becomes more important.”

“Need for virtual communication is amplified.”

“Communication skills have always been a priority, but using technology to convey ideas, build relationships, and gain buy-in for projects/ideas has been a challenge.”

Virtual Communication Is More Essential Than Ever

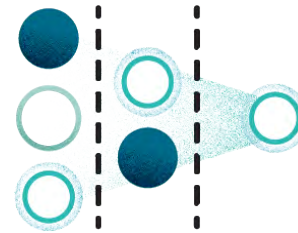


Throughout this year, many businesses accelerated their adoption of digital technologies¹ to facilitate the shift online. Now as we enter 2021, virtual communication skills have become a necessity.

When we asked respondents how COVID-19 has impacted the importance of communication skills at their organization, the shift to virtual communication was a dominant theme. In particular, **clarity, empathy, and use of various communication channels** were areas of emphasis.

Timeliness and Clarity

Communicating in a virtual environment has led to an increase in the importance of frequent, clear, and concise communication.



“Change is happening rapidly and communication, though overwhelming for both the sender and the receiver, still has to happen in a rapid, transparent and clear manner.”

“It’s also more important to touch base with our colleagues more often now so we can be sure we are working together towards the same goal and not duplicating effort or letting anything slide.”

“It’s now crucial more than ever to communicate clearly, and timely.”

Listening and Empathy

Communicating during a pandemic (or crisis) begs for a foundation of good listening and empathy skills—especially to compensate for the loss of non-verbal cues in virtual communication.



“We need to be able to show empathy and compassion through our communication skills.”

“It has required us to focus deeply on listening and empathy, more so than ever before.”

“In a virtual world, body language is out, its absence amplifies the importance of clarity of communication and highly attentive listening skills to get those nuanced cues more easily read during live communication.”

Channels and Platforms

While there are overlaps with virtual and in-person communication, virtual communication comes with a unique set of needs, skills, and tools.



“More communication takes place over text, chat and email, severely limiting the message. Without body language, tone, or facial expressions, it’s easier to misinterpret or ascribe a tone to a message that wasn’t intended. Seeing more miscommunications, short messages, and challenging discussions taking place over email or chat when meetings would benefit tremendously.”

“Folks are not always adapting (meetings are too long, not using virtual tools as well as they could).”

“Different mediums require different approaches.”

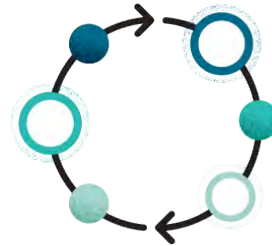
Communication Is a Powerful Coping Tool for Workers, Teams, and Organizations



We asked how communication has helped their organization through COVID-19, which revealed the potent ways it can be used to combat isolation and uncertainty while building confidence and capability for the future.

Increased Connection

Communication during COVID-19 has provided the benefit of keeping people connected.



"Communication has allowed people to feel connected while isolated."

"With most employees working from home throughout the pandemic, clear and regular communications has been vital to help employees feel connected and keep them moving positively toward company goals."

"[Communication has been] vital to me to stay in touch with customers and stakeholders."

Reduced Uncertainty

Communication during COVID-19 has allowed organizations to keep people informed, decrease uncertainty, and increase trust.



"[Communication has] helped us all keep informed and in turn, helped us retain employees because they're in the know. When someone isn't communicated with, fears and anxiety can arise which in turn, makes a decrease in productivity and happiness of the employee."

"There are so many uncertainties right now. It's important to know what's going on with the company we work for and where we stand as employees."

"[Communication creates] security and safety in a time of uncertainty."

Improved Safety

Virtual communication has allowed many people to minimize their risk of contracting the virus by working remotely, while on-site workers have benefitted from communication that kept them informed about workplace safety.



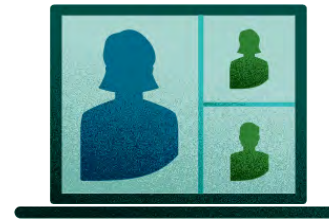
"Telecommunications has allowed us to accomplish work from home in a safer setting."

"Awareness against spreading of the virus, safe workplace procedure."

"Creating security and safety in a time of uncertainty."

More Opportunities

Effective communication throughout the crisis has enabled organizations to navigate problems and even innovate new solutions. Also, diverse communication channels and forms allow people to keep working during times of change.



“Through COVID-19, communication has moved from in-person interactions and meetings to virtual interactions through different platforms and apps. It has forced many in the organization to learn new ways of communicating using technology.”

“Updates, new initiatives, and greater focus toward finding opportunities and solutions in these trying times have kept many from falling into negative habits.”

“[Communication] has allowed us to keep operating, despite having to switch abruptly to online.”

Poor Communication During a Crisis Negatively Impacts Workers and Organizations

While successful communication has a range of benefits, especially during a crisis, poor communication can disadvantage workers and organizations.

Respondents highlighted the following communication “don’ts,” and we are passing them along so that others do not make these same mistakes in the future.



Embrace Transformation

Don't stick with the way things have always been done when change is needed.

Driving transformation is no easy feat, but not embracing change has its own negative effects as seen by our participant responses here.



"In your own words, how has communication helped your organization through COVID-19?"

"Our communication is stretched at this point. We're trying to duplicate the success of being in an open room with frequent huddles on projects/direction. 90% of communication is non-verbal...Slacking or email just isn't the same. We're still at the struggling stage."

"Many felt the communication was all about how to get us back into the office with no support for remote work."

Convey Empathy and Alignment

Avoid fragmented and unempathetic communication.

Communicating with empathy and care shows people you value them, and having consistent, clear, and aligned communication throughout an organization is especially important in a crisis.



"In your own words, how has communication helped your organization through COVID-19?"

"Poorly. Impersonal, emails which quote governmental regulations. Essential workers kept working onsite and our managers communicated with us. Remote workers were communicated by CEO and Vice Presidents about future of work and held virtual meetings about safety protocols and re-entry programs while the rest of us were coming into work every day. Created huge divide among workers and some workers are still remote and essential workers who had medical issues or concerns had to go onto disability or quit."

"I don't think it has... it's been quite fragmented"

Soft Skills Insights

Soft skills are important to the daily performance of organizations.

Communication skills benefit workers and organizations. Our research demonstrates that COVID-19 influenced the importance of virtual communication. More specifically, communicating in a timely, concise, and clear fashion was important, as were listening and empathy. Respondents also found when transitioning online that communication across channels comes with a unique set of skills and considerations.

Per our research, the top 3 soft skills of 2020 are **adaptability, communication, and collaboration.**

Communication was deemed more important than ever in helping organizations achieve their goals, but employees were viewed as not being very skilled in communication.

Top 3 Soft Skills of 2020

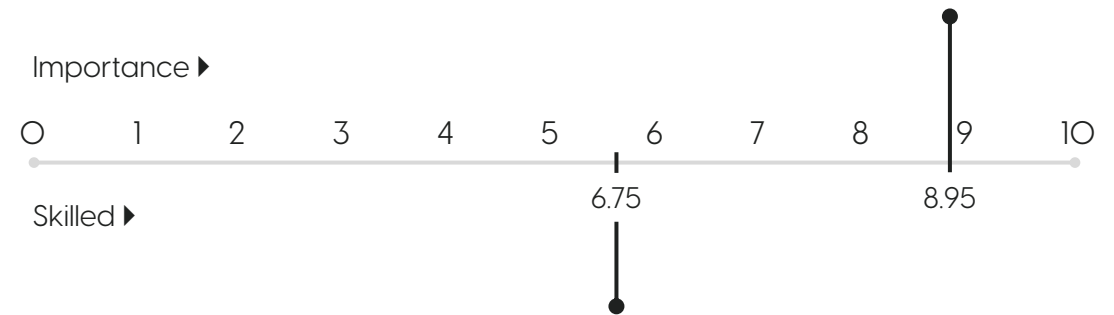
Early this year, LinkedIn Learning released its 2020 Workplace Learning Report¹ which listed adaptability as the 4th top in-demand soft skill of 2020—ironic given the events that followed.

In response to the impacts of COVID-19, people and organizations had to adapt to challenges, transitions, and changing tasks—all of which require adaptability, according to research in the Journal of Career Assessment². A licensed counselor quoted in The Washington Post³ defined adaptability as “the ability to be creative and flexible in the face of new situations;” and advised people to “ride change like a wave. If you’re in a fall, a rise will follow.” Since LinkedIn’s report at the beginning of the year, we found that **adaptability is now the #1 in-demand soft skill of 2020.**



Communication Skills Are Important to Achieving Goals

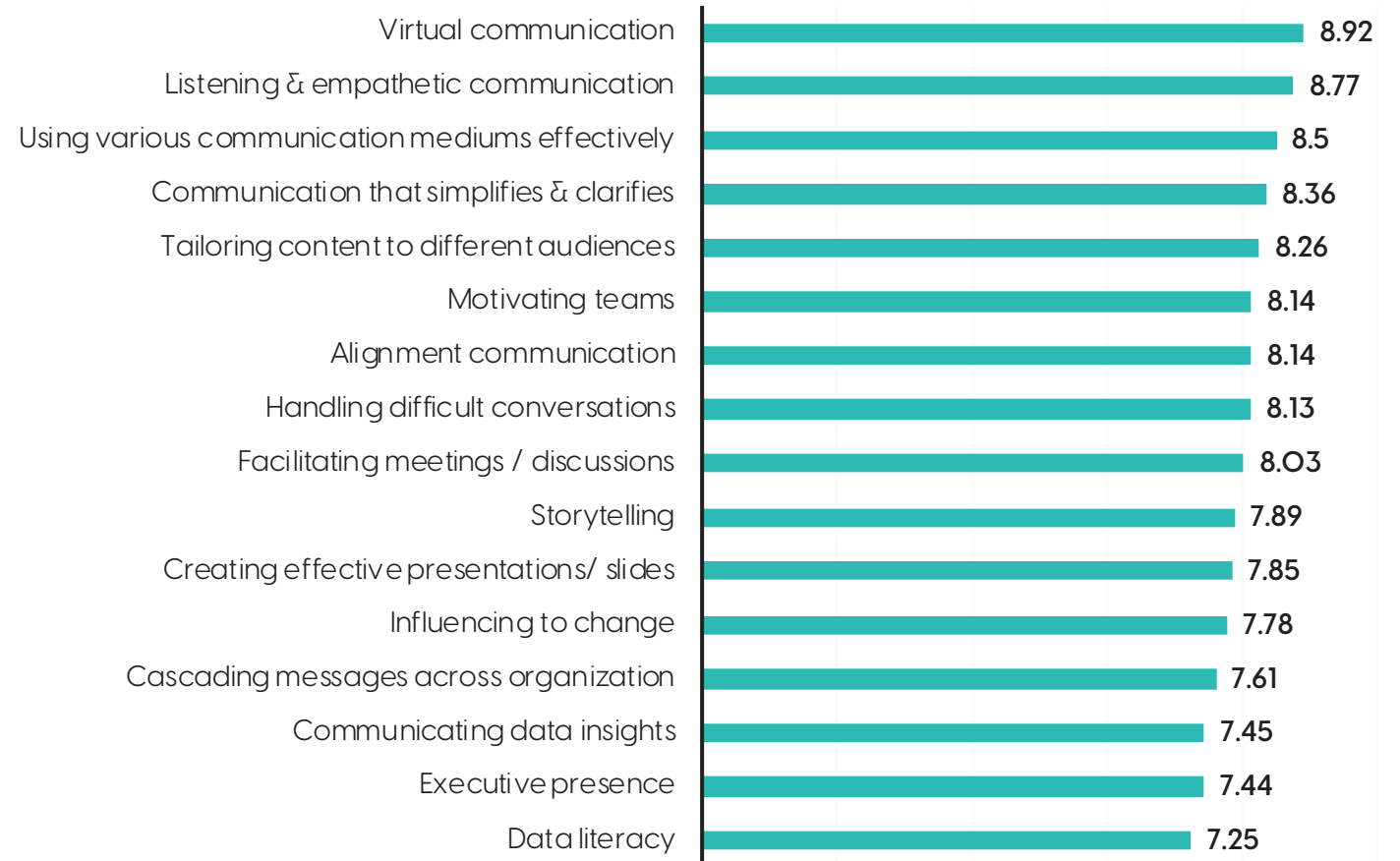
How important are communication skills in helping your organization achieve its goals for right now?



How proficient are your employees in communication skills?

Soft Skills Are Important for the Daily Performance of Organizations

Read on to discover the variety of different soft skills that can be leveraged to enhance effectiveness within different roles.



Leadership Skills

Leadership is more crucial than ever as companies navigate the 4th industrial revolution and the increasingly remote and hybrid nature of work.

The World Economic Forum¹ named leadership as one of the top 10 skills of 2025.

Research² suggests that **soft skills are priorities for leadership development, and that communication skills are of second most priority for leadership development.** At Duarte we know from experience what communication skills successful leaders need, because we have decades of experience training and working with some of the top leaders around the globe. We've found that in order to lead, one must master a variety of soft skills. These same skills were also found to be important to a company's overall daily performance.

Scale of importance

0

10

8.77 Listening and empathetic communication

8.14 Alignment communication

8.14 Motivating teams to achieve goals

8.13 Handling difficult conversations

7.89 Storytelling

7.78 Influencing to change

Virtual Communication Skills

Online and hybrid workforce skills are in demand.

In March 2020, Gartner¹ found that 88% of organizations encouraged or required employees to work from home. Also, in October 2020, Enterprise Technology Research (ETR)² reported that the permanent remote workforce would likely double after the pandemic (16.4% to 34.4%).

This research suggests that the move to remote work is here to stay. Our research suggests that the skills needed to successfully communicate online are also important to the daily performance of an organization.

Scale of importance (0-10)

...7

9...

8.92 Virtual communication

8.50 Using various communication mediums

8.03 Meeting/discussion facilitation

7.78 Effective presentations/slides

Storytelling and Influence Skills

A combination of skills that are necessary for successful storytelling are also important to the daily performance of an organization.

One salient way to communicate complex concepts is through storytelling. To make an impact using story, one must master listening and empathetic communication—putting their audience’s needs first. These skills are vital to communicating your best and inspiring your audience to act.

Additionally, simplifying complex ideas is extremely important in times of crisis, invention, communicating data, seeking buy-in, and aligning stakeholders.

Scale of importance (0-10)

...7

9...

8.77 Listening and empathetic communication

8.36 Simplify/clarify complex content

8.26 Tailoring content to different audiences

7.89 Storytelling

7.78 Influencing change

Soft Skills for Data Roles

As we accelerate into our data centric future, the World Economic Forum¹ shows that data centered roles are increasing in demand.

More and more roles are using data, and with an increase in hard skills comes an increase for the need to be proficient in complementary soft skills. According to Udemy², those whose who can communicate data insights will prove to be “invaluable to their organization.”

Scale of importance

0

10

8.92 Virtual communication

8.50 Using various communication mediums

7.89 Storytelling

7.85 Effective presentations/ slides

7.45 Communicating data insights

7.25 Data literacy

Data points are out of a 10-point scale, with 10 being very important.

L&D Industry Insights

The L&D industry hasn't been immune to the negative economic impacts of COVID-19.

Most respondents (41.41%) said their training budgets decreased due to COVID-19. While uncertainty remained at the time of this survey, looking into 2021 our research suggests that it is possible for budgets to rebound, and soft skills training will be an important training investment.

Outside research by Transparency Market Research¹ also suggests that the global soft skills training market will grow beyond \$53.4 billion by 2030. A major driver behind the increase is the need to “build power learners,” which according to the International Monetary Fund² will be necessary “to meet the demands of our transforming and changing environment.”

The L&D industry embraced online learning in 2020. We saw the preference for in-person training dip, while live virtual training soared. We anticipate training will shift further with a preference toward hybrid/blended training. The future of training will likely continue the trend toward more learner-centric and customized training including live online and self-directed online courses.

Preferred Training Methods



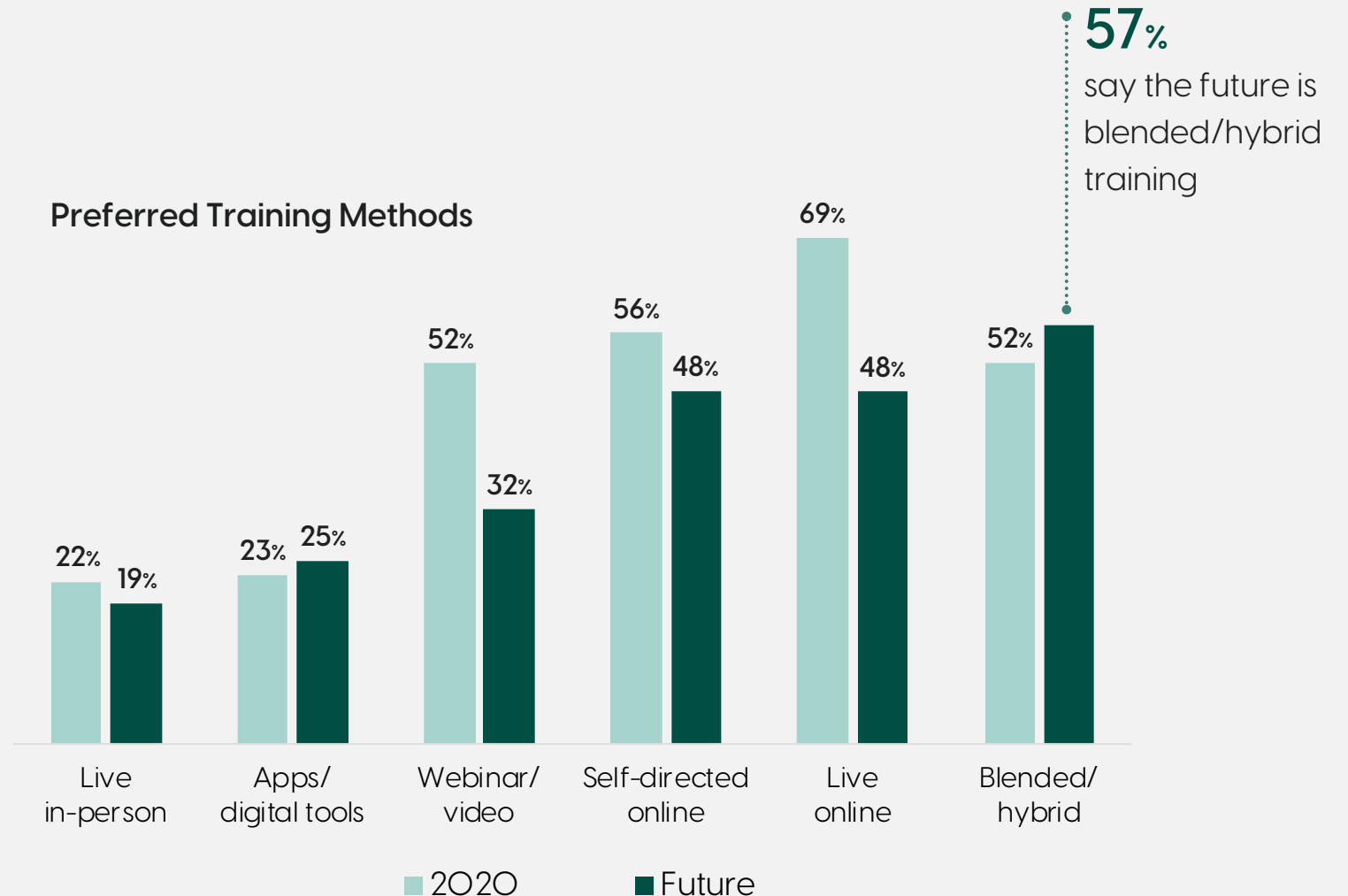
Since COVID-19, respondents indicated that their preference for corporate trainings have moved away from in-person training. This is supported by research from LinkedIn¹ that shows long-term training plans will center around online, rather than in-person, formats.

The Future of Training

Most of our respondents agreed that they preferred blended/hybrid training in the future.

These learning experiences provide opportunities to maximize the full range and potential of training options available. For example, in a blended program, one could craft a learning experience that includes live online training, self-directed online training, a selection of webinars and videos, and microlearning.

Preferred Training Methods

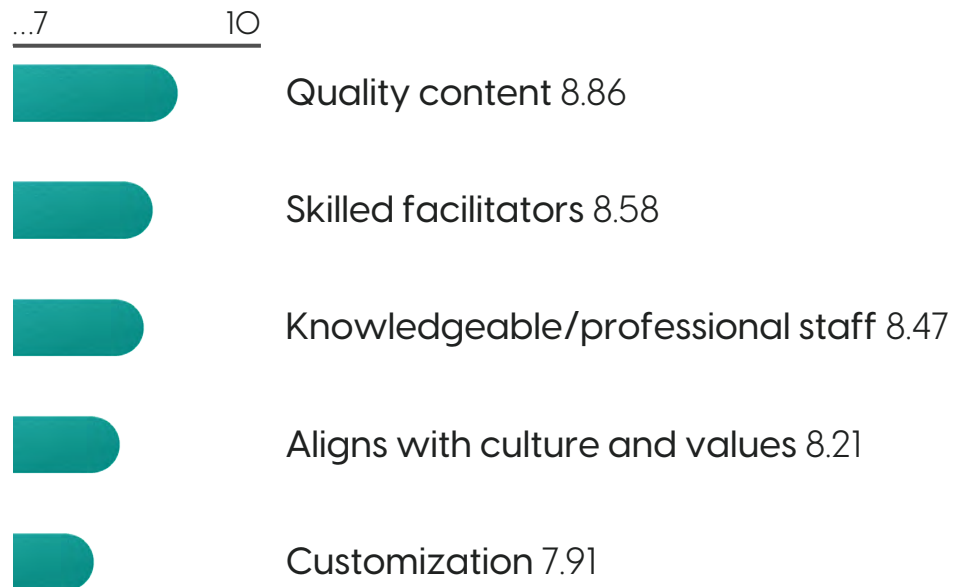


Training Preferences

Content and facilitators are important factors when choosing a training vendor and for live online training.

Choosing a Training Vendor

Scale of importance (0-10)



Live Online Training

Scale of importance (0-10)





Predicted Training Budgets & Spending

We asked professionals how COVID-19 was impacting their training budget. Most (41.41%) saw their training budget decrease, many (35.35%) saw no change, few (7.07%) noted an increase, and some (16.16%) didn't know.

Spending decreases during 2020 are understandable, particularly among small businesses, which made up a large percentage of our respondents. Because small businesses often work with fewer resources, it stands to reason that they may have needed to tighten their budgets due to COVID-19.

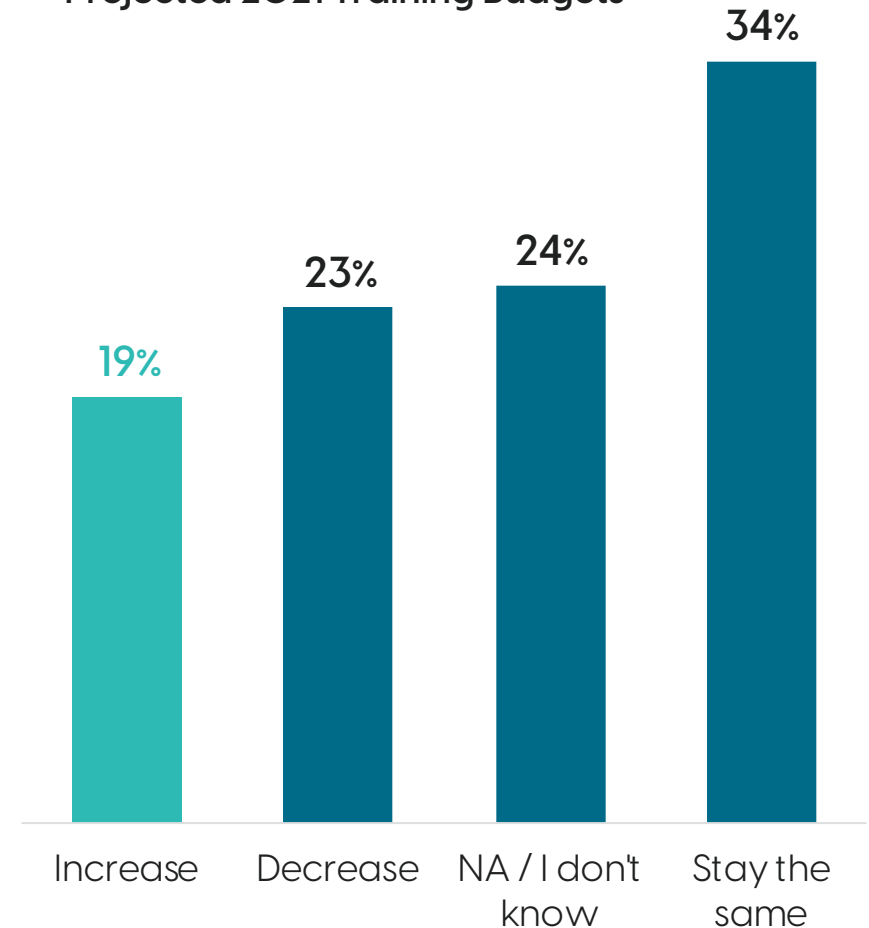
Room for Optimism

In addition to 2020 budgets, we also asked professionals how they predicted their training budgets might change in 2021.

Many were uncertain about their future budgets, and only a small percentage expected an increase.

While some projected a budget decrease, there is room to be optimistic about the L&D landscape in 2021. Research by Training Industry^{1, 2} suggests that 2020 may have actually seen an increase in training spending, and that the global corporate training market in 2019 was about \$370.3 Billion. And, while there was a projected contraction in the global training market in 2020, they project that it will rebound in 2021 “with a 3% growth.”

Projected 2021 Training Budgets



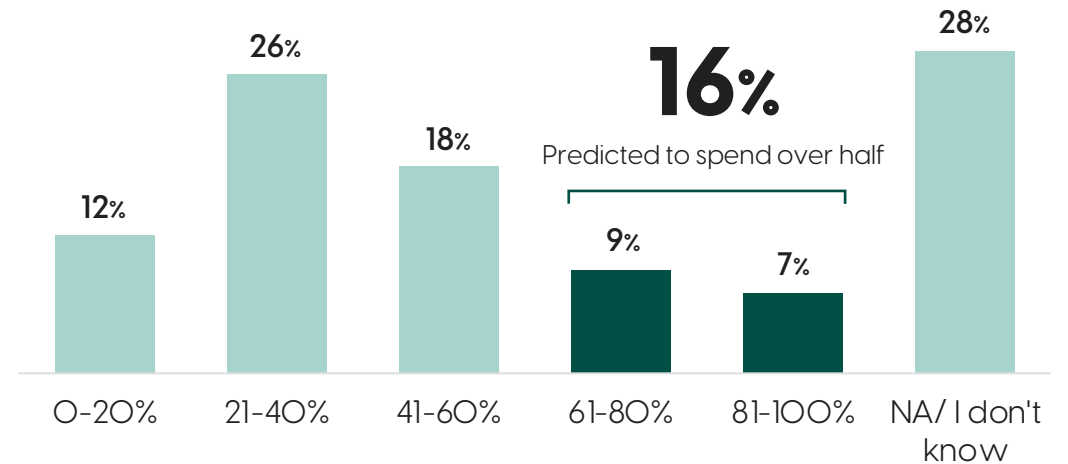
Predicted Spending

Soft skills training spending is strong.

Outside research by Transparency Market Research¹ supports the value of soft skills training, suggesting that global soft skills training is on the rise and the market is “projected to cross US\$ 53.4 Billion by 2030.” This complements our findings, which show that future training dollars are predicted to be spent on soft skills training.



“Looking ahead 18 months, how much of your training budget do you predict will be devoted to soft skills training?”



Conclusion

Being skilled in communication is increasingly important, and the training industry is transforming to meet current and future soft skills needs.

2020 was a year of transformation for many but the transition was smoother for those organizations that communicated well throughout the crisis. Soft skills proved to be essential to the day-to-day performance of organizations, especially the ability to adapt and communicate with empathy across a variety of channels.

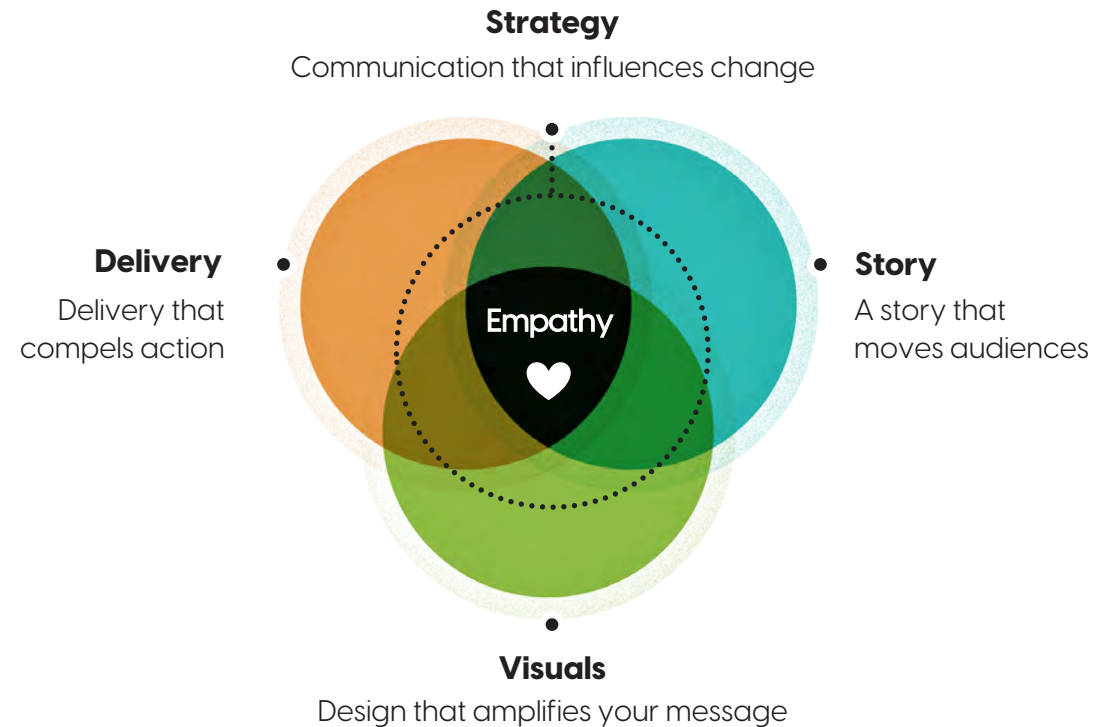
Moving forward, proficiency in soft skills will be a must, especially as data-centric roles increase, and employers work to retain their top talent and return to growth. To help employees up-level their communication skills and evolve to meet future demands, the trend toward learner-driven training will continue, as will the need for learning that fits into the flow of their work. With the right mix of communication training, organizations will be well-positioned to emerge stronger and sustain momentum well into the future.

About Duarte

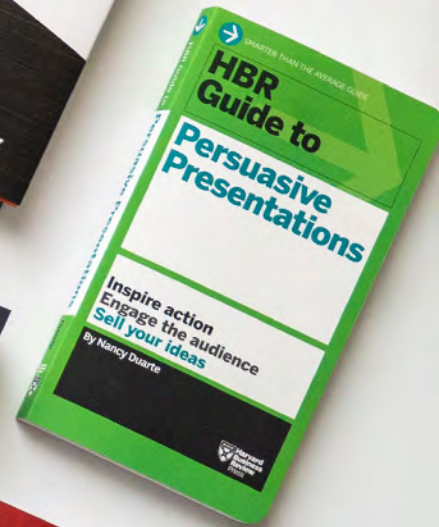
We increase your influence so you can move audiences.

Duarte helps people and organizations worldwide communicate with greater impact and influence. We're specialists in the spoken word – the most powerful medium for moving people to believe something new. Since 1988, we have dedicated ourselves to mastering this specialized craft.

Whether we're shaping movements, epic mainstage moments, or everyday conversations, our Duarte Method™ places empathy, story, and design at the core of communication. It's the method we've used for decades with the highest performing brands in the world. How can we help you?



Our Methodology



Story

Presentation Fundamentals ●

Presentation Principles

Based on the HBR Guide to Persuasive Presentations, learn to tell compelling stories and create audience empathy

Narrative Design for Presentations: Intro ● ●

1Day VisualStory®

Create presentations using the combined power of story and visuals

Narrative Design for Presentations: Advanced ●

2Day VisualStory®

Transform audiences with a deep understanding of how narrative and design can change minds

Storytelling With Data ● ●

DataStory™

Build data recommendations that enable decision-making

Story for Presentations ● ● ●

Resonate™

Use story to hold your audience's attention and initiate action

Influence With Story ● ●

Story Fundamentals

Tell the right stories at the right time to inspire action

Visuals

Document Design ●

Slidedocs™

Leverage presentation software to create strong long-form documents

Visual Thinking ● ●

Slide:ology™

Turn words into pictures and simplify complex concepts in presentations

Presentation Design ● ●

Slide Design™

Quickly make clean, compelling slides in PowerPoint™

Delivery

Virtual Presenting ●

Captivate™ for Virtual Communication

Learn to communicate effectively in virtual environments

Public Speaking ● ●

Captivate™

Strengthen your stage presence; available in small and large group formats

Strategy

Communication Strategy ● ●

Illuminate™

Lead change by communicating well at each step of the journey

Duarte Academy

● In-Person
Workshop

● Live Virtual
Workshop

● Self-Paced
Online Course

Acknowledgements

Respondents

Thank you to the survey participants who shared their feedback so that others could benefit from their insights into the importance of and approaches toward communication training and soft skills development.

Research Analyst, Author

Hayley Hawthorne, PhD

Project Manager

Julie Leong

Chief Strategy Officer

Patti Sanchez

Marketing

Catrinel Bartolomeu
Alexa Harrison
Emily Williams

Design

Chariti Canny
Aisling Doyle

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