ADAPTATION OF ONLINE TRAINING IN UiTM DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: EXPERIENCE OF ILD UiTM

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Abstract

Covid-19 pandemic has hit the world at the end of 2019 and Malaysia is one of the affected countries. The Malaysian government has tried to minimize movement to reduce the spread of this virus. As we all know, the learning and training process is one of the areas affected. All institutions of higher learning and schools had to be closed for the benefit of all. UiTM has also issued operating guidelines during Covid-19. Institute of Leadership Development (ILD) UiTM is a training centre for staff that needs to be managed and given attention. Even in uncertain situations, training for staff needs to be continued. As a solution, ILD UiTM has adopted new practices to continue the functions of this centre. Online training was introduced to further enliven the training to staff. But there are challenges in reaching, adapting, and achieving effectiveness of online training.

Keywords: new norms, online training, training centre,

Introduction

The Institute of Leadership and Development (ILD) UiTM plays the role of conducting training operations for UiTM staff nationwide every year. Training programmes are planned periodically through a training calendar which is compiled on a yearly basis according to the training needs analysis (TNA) and training requirements (training needs identification - TNI) proposed by the head of the departments in UiTM as well as executing its function of providing training to staff. ILD UiTM training facilities are also used by external parties including government agencies and the private sectors as training facilities. This is because the training facilities at ILD UiTM are among the best of all public universities in Malaysia. Two training facilities in Bandar Enstek, Negeri Sembilan and Kampung Gajah, Perak are always vibrant with various training programmes. There are seven main objectives of the establishment of ILD UiTM which are as follows:

1. To produce academic staff of high-calibre and high-performance who contribute to the institutions and communities.
2. To produce knowledgeable, skilled administrative staff who have a positive attitude towards high productivity.
3. To plan, develop and offer staff training and development programmes according to the current

needs.
4. To conduct research and evaluate the effectiveness of staff training and development programmes.
5. To provide programmes that help to strengthen talent candidates for university succession plans.
6. To forge cooperation in the development of human resource with other organisations in Malaysia
7. To provide a more conducive training space, infrastructure and environment.

The main goal of ILD UiTM is to develop high calibre leaders and staff as well as becoming a renowned leadership and development institute in Malaysia. Beginning 18 March 2020 when the Movement Control Order (MCO) was implemented, UiTM's training landscape has changed, and ILD is no exception when all face-to-face training operations had to be called off during the MCO period. However, in order to meet the needs of working staff from home, ILD UiTM management has taken swift action by identifying online training that employees can undergo to continuously improve their skills, knowledge and abilities. Thus, on 26 March 2020 ILD UiTM shared a training catalogue on its website and was distributed to all heads of major departments for the benefit of UiTM staff. This training catalogue offers training organized by INTAN JPA, MOOC module (collaboration between ILD and ICEPS), and free online training from other public universities or open-source websites.

The new norms

The adaptation of the new norms has resulted in the organization of online courses throughout the MCO period. Although in principle the management of ILD UiTM does not provide courses using online mode. Discussions were held with speakers and consultants involved in the courses to continue conducting courses online. Not all courses stated in the training calendar were conducted online, as several courses require face-to-face participation and interaction between participants and speakers, or the module itself requires it to be implemented face to face. However, for courses that can be implemented online, the preparation in terms of schedules, content and speakers was done and ILD UiTM has successfully implemented these courses. For information sharing content, courses were conducted using a webinar platform for one or two hours with identified participants from a specific target group or non-identified participants (for courses that are open to all UiTM staff). However, for courses with specific modules and Key Performance Indicator (KPI), the target groups were identified earlier and the duration of the courses was longer, normally they require one or two days to complete the module, depending on the course requirements and content.

In an effort to resume training operations, ILD UiTM management has prepared standard operating procedures (SOP) to resume training operations in June 2020. The SOP had been presented to the UiTM Executive Meeting (MEU) and it was fully supported by MEU before submitting it to the National Security Council (MKN). The contents of the SOP indicated ILD UiTM's intention to resume its operations starting from 1 July 2020 once the situation has improved and the COVID19 cases decrease. MKN has approved the SOP and ILD UiTM has resumed training operations from 1 July 2020 according to the SOP provided (together with the SOP by the MKN). As such, officially from 1 July 2020, ILD UiTM has returned to its operations at both training facilities in Bandar Enstek and Kampung Gajah with a maximum capacity of 200 participants in a single day. The progress showed that all the courses postponed from March 2020 were restructured and the lively atmosphere returned to ILD UiTM when staff from all over the country began to regenerate knowledge even with strict SOPs such as single room accommodation, reduced number of participants and packed food.

But it is unfortunate that current developments have seen an increase in the new COVID19 positive cases. ILD UiTM once again ceased the face-to-face training operations after receiving advice from MEU and resumed online training operations on 8 October 2020. If the situation gets better with a

positive decline in new cases of positive COVID19, and more green zones nationwide declared, ILD UiTM hopes to resume its normal training operations at the beginning of 2021.

The advantages and acceptance

With all the challenges of the new norm of training provision, ILD UiTM experiences the advantages of conducting online training that can be summarized as follows;

1. Technology **-** The Internet and gadgets have become parts of everyone's lives nowadays (Hoi, Sahoo, Lu, & Zhao, 2018) . It is an advantage to online training that is conducted by ILD UiTM. Staff can easily participate and get involved in the training programmes. It is the most important aspect of online training; participation or involvement.

2. Cost-saving – Cost of accommodations, foods, transportation, training materials and other hidden costs can be reduced because of online training (Webb, Stockwell, & Chavez-Ugalde, 2017). Expenses incurred are mainly for paying the trainers. Printed materials are no longer needed to be prepared and distributed since physical attendance is not required (Dhawan, 2020).

3. Easy to conduct – Online courses/training programmes can easily be conducted because of the new methods which do not require rigid preparation for accommodation and foods (Lourenco & Ferreira, 2019). Unlike the face to face training, the accommodation has to be prepared based on the grade of the staff and food preparation has to be made based on the number of participants.

4. Minimal staff needed (Webb et al., 2017) – Only a moderator from ILD UiTM is needed to conduct online training along with the speakers/trainers. As compared to face-to-face training, a staff has to be ready at the registration counter for room registration and check-ins purposes, an audiovisual staff has to be present at all times for recording purposes, the staff has to be available at the registration desks for registration at the training rooms, and a driver has to be ready to chauffeur participants or speakers/trainers from and to the airport (if required).

5. Recordings – ILD UiTM records all the training programmes and this practice requires too much time and effort to be properly conducted. By using an online platform, all training can be recorded easily without much effort and can be sent to the participants for their references (Gillett-Swan, 2017). It can be done through email or drive sharing and most importantly the recording is done without the presence of the Audio-Visual teams as we practice during face to face training.

6. An increase on the number of participants – there is no restriction in the number of participants when the training is conducted online. The online training rooms are bigger and can accommodate more participants (Gillett-Swan, 2017). For example, if ILD UiTM uses the Webex platform, it can accommodate up to 1000 participants as compared to the largest room in ILD UiTM which is Auditorium Perdana that can only accommodate up to 150 participants. It gives more opportunity to reach more staff and to train more participants.

7. Flexibility – For some staff, they refuse to attend courses that require them to stay at ILD UiTM because they have kids or family to look after and the distance from their campus is far from ILD UiTM. By having an online training, participants can join the training programmes from their respective campuses within their working hours (Hoi et al., 2018). No travelling is needed, and participants do not have to be concerned about leaving their family when they have to physically attend the training programmes at ILD UiTM.

The Challenges and Barriers

Challenges are inevitable especially when implementing something new (Crowling, 2020). Among the challenges in adapting to the new norms of training include:

1. Limitations of Technology/Connections - User-friendly and reliable technology is critical to a successful online programme (Hoi et al., 2018). However, breakdowns can occur at any point when using the technology. For example, the server which hosts the programme could crash and cut all participants off from the training; participants may access the training programmes through a networked computer which could go down; individual PCs can have numerous problems which could limit the access; finally, the Internet connection could fail, or the institution hosting the connection could become bogged down with users and either slow down or fail altogether. In situations like these, technology is neither seamless nor reliable, and it can detract from having favourable or satisfying learning experience.

2. Attitude (resistant to accept new norms) - An online method of training can be a highly effective alternative medium for those who are willing to learn, mature, and self-disciplined (Gillett-Swan, 2017). It is an inappropriate learning environment for more dependent learners. In order to successfully participate in an online programme, staff must be willing to accept the new norms (having high openness), well organized (having high conscientiousness), self- motivated (having positive emotions/moods), and possess a high degree of willingness to learn new things (having high agreeableness)(Panigrahi, Srivastava, & Sharma, 2018).

3. Changing the individual personality is difficult, however, when there is a pressure to change as in the case of COVID19 pandemic, we hope that UiTM staff should exert necessary efforts to change so that they can move forward to achieve excellence. At the initial stage of change, freeing oneself from the old norms is a must to ensure that the person does not have a preconception of the new norms (Gillett-Swan, 2017). The next important stage is where the participant is willing to learn using the new method and having the right emotion during training. Not all the courses/training can be conducted online – Even with recently generated excitement and enthusiasm for online training, it is important to recognize that some courses should not be taught online because the electronic medium does not permit the best methods of instruction. Examples include hands-on training such as customer service, driving skills, public speaking, and sports where physical movement and practices contribute to the achievement of the learning objectives. These courses are probably best taught in a face-to-face traditional learning environment.

4. Courses too long – there are training programmes conducted by ILD UiTM that require a long period of time for completion, such as *Program Transformasi Minda* (PTM) and Higher Education Teaching and Learning (HETL), these training programmes will make staff feel bored and leave the session if conducted online.

5. Computer Literacy – these challenges are mostly faced by lower grade staff in UiTM. They are the ones who perform the operation function that does not require them to be proficient in computers. The staff should at least possess a minimum level of computer knowledge in order to function successfully in an online environment (Gillett-Swan, 2017).

6. Sense of isolation – While online training can be quite interactive these days, through the use of video conferences, webinars, and face-to-face video chat, it is still not the same as sitting across the room with real people (Brennan, Sellmaier, Jivanjee, & Grover, 2019). In other words, there is no substitute for training with lively interaction with, and real learning from trainers/speakers.

7. Effectiveness of the courses - Less control over cheating or absent from training (Lourenco & Ferreira, 2019). Participants who are inclined to cheat will cheat or are absent from the training session, whether they attend an online course or face to face training programme. But online training gives them more freedom to do so. They can just open the training, then go somewhere else or do other things without giving much attention to lesson delivered during the session. At the end of the training session, they register themselves and finish the training successfully

without listening to the whole content of the training. In other words, they learn nothing from the training session.

Some Points to Ponder/Implications of the Paper

The following are some points to be considered to ensure that the new norms can be beneficial to ILD UiTM and all UiTM staff.

a) UiTM staff must be prepared and ready to adapt to the new norms. It is impossible for us to go back to the old practice because until now the vaccine for the COVID19 pandemic is still unavailable. Investment in the new technology, learning the technology, changing the attitudes, and learning to cope with the pressure are required (Azlan, Hamzah, Sern, Ayub, & Mohamad, 2020). In the current situation, pressure is continuously escalating and coping with it keeps us composed(Dai, Zhang, Looi, Su, & Li, 2020).

b) Besides the threat of the COVID19 pandemic, we are also experiencing the annual budget cut. This is another challenge specifically for ILD UiTM staff and the UiTM staff in general to manage the allocation wisely so that the KPIs are achieved regardless of this budget-cut. In this case, online training is the only option available due to its low cost feature. Hence, optimize its in the form of learning new skills to raise our job performance.

c) Although in the next year calendar, most training programmes will be conducted online, their effectiveness cannot be ignored. Realizing the need to gradually improve the effectiveness of training from time to time, ILD UiTM has made it compulsory to all staff attending the training programmes to submit the evaluation form immediately after the completion of each session. This input is important to ensure that enhanced training programmes can be offered in future.

d) Training participants are also urged to optimize their interaction with other participants and the speakers during the training session so that they can reap the most benefits from the session. Training is not just to fulfil the required 42 contact hours a year but it is meant to improve one's performance through enhanced skills, knowledge and abilities. Therefore, all participants are advised to learn as much as possible via various available means and don't waste the available opportunity.

Conclusion

It is clearly stated in the UiTM circular that all staff must complete 42 hours of training a year. During the COVID19 pandemic, it becomes harder to fulfil that requirement. Online training is one of the best solutions. However, it is important for all staff to understand that attending training is not to fulfil their training hours only, training is more than that. It is the outcome in the form of enhanced knowledge, skills and attitude that they benefit from training and they must attend the training programmes according to the right competencies required by the positions held. In other words, carefully selecting the right training programmes to attend will provide the ultimate benefit to the staff.

For the year 2021, a more dynamic training calendar has been formulated. This training calendar does not only consider feedback through training needs analysis (TNA) among staff but also considers the needs and feedback from heads of departments as well as the requirements of the UiTM's strategic planning unit. The management of ILD UiTM is optimistic in implementing competency-based training through the great idea of Competency-Based Talent Development (CBTM). Through the development of competency sets according to the requirements of the 5 main components (Core, Generic, Functional, Leadership and Values) training can be planned in a more orderly manner according to the needs of each scheme and grade of the position held.

COVID19 has indeed changed the training narrative at UiTM and has made ILD UiTM more creative to change its operations. ILD UiTM should move forward by adopting new norms in providing training services to staff regardless of the acceptance and rejection of this new method among the staff.

Disclosures and alerts have been and will continuously be channeled tirelessly to attract staff to participate in courses organized by ILD UiTM. Training is an important aspect of the development and career advancement of staff, and it is also an aspect that is emphasized in human resource management. By changing its service landscape in training provision, ILD UiTM anticipates that UiTM staff will continuously enhance their skills, knowledge and abilities in pursuit of excellence.

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