



# Contract Training and the Pandemic



*The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted North American business and industry, as well as government agencies and local organizations. All establishments are working to understand the implications of the pandemic and to figure out strategies for navigating the business impact. The ripple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are difficult to model and assess, but help is needed.*

Leaders in the field of contract training met to share actions they have taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on their clients, community, as well as their contract training units. All attendees reported the pandemic being unsettling and impactful on their business, but they also conveyed some positive results from actions they have taken to support their clients and community.

The following are the primary actions contract training leaders shared:

### **Less Cancellations and More Postponements:**

Most leaders report a dramatic decrease in business, but for many that has meant many more postponements than cancellations. Clients are still in need of contract services, but employees are not in the location and/or presently have the time for training.

Some contract training units are still delivering onsite training. Time and resources have been dedicated to ensuring safety best practices are being followed. Interestingly this work is serving as a model for their institutions as strategic plans are developed for returning to onsite teaching.

An excellent suggestion for future contract delivery is providing instructor grab bags that are given to instructors and include safety and personal protective equipment, as well as tips for managing a safe training environment.

**Shift to Online:** Many contract trainings have been shifted to online delivery. Clients report being satisfied and may going forward utilize more online opportunities.

There has also been a request by business and industry to help them enter the virtual world of learning but also of operating. For some contract training teams this has included providing use of the unit's LMS system.

The shift to online has also increased the toolboxes of contract training units and may reduce an over-dependency on face-to-face training.

**Lead Generation:** Staff time has been dedicated to actions that have connected the contract training units with potential new clients, as well as staying in touch with existing clients. Units have been proactive

about scheduling free services that draw both existing and potential clients and have then put in place follow-up strategies for staying in touch.

Now may not be the time for training, but instead a time for nurturing. Salespeople have been given metrics based on contacts more than sales, thus ensuring salespeople are staying in touch. This has been a time to fill the pipeline for future sales.

**Communication:** Staying in contact with clients and the business, government agency and local organization community has been important. Whether by email, social media, or a telephone call, staying in touch has been a strategic action.

Communication has included providing tips for handling the pandemic, sharing industry-specific content, and providing ways business and industry leaders and employees can connect with others to share what is and is not working for them.

It is not best to send out long, detailed communications, but instead send out more shorter communications.

**Free Services:** Offering free webinars has been a popular service that has a) helped existing and potential clients with safety and other best practices during a challenging time, b) demonstrated the contract training unit's dedication to their clients and community, and c) supported increased communication and lead generation.

Example topics include: Working and Managing Remotely, Leading Through Crisis, and Fundamentals of Personal Well Being. In some cases industry-specific webinars have been developed and presented. Instructors are being paid, but maybe a lesser stipend.

There has also been experimentation with short "Take 10" ten-minute webinars, as well as short podcasts focused on a particular skill or knowledge element. People are busy with both work and home requirements and appreciate shorter and more targeted information.

While most webinars have been offered for free, there has been a willingness to pay for webinars either per

seat or customized at a flat rate for their employees. Some contract training units are offering after-webinar customized coaching, sometimes for a fee.

**Upskilling of Instructors:** Many instructors have required upskilling in teaching online that is helping both in the short and long-run. A great deal of time has been dedicated to training and supporting instructors being asked to shift their training to online.

This has also been a time for "master" teachers to train new instructors. Contract training units are looking to increase their stable of instructors, especially as certain instructors with extensive expertise are considering retirement.

Contract training units are dedicating staff resources and time to connecting with industry experts about the latest trends, best practices and strategies being used in their industry. This research is providing direction for future products or product upgrading.

**Hands-On Challenge:** The most challenging contract services have been trades offerings that require hands-on activities. Some, such as Sustainable Industry and Blueprint Reading have been shifted online, while others have not been able to be offered.

Some contract training units have experimented with hybrid training, where most teaching is done online with participants coming onsite just for the hands-on component. Research has also started on the utilization of virtual technology to teach skills, but there is a significant investment.

**Building Future Products:** In an effort to be positioned for success as we transition out of the pandemic, contract training units are upgrading existing products and building new products that are or will be in demand. Time has been spent surveying business and industry about needed contract services and utilizing their subject matter expertise to support development.

There have also been requests for reskilling employees for a new way of working after the pandemic, especially those people who have lost their jobs. In some cases funding has been located to cover the costs of the training.

It was noted as important to not always try to reinvent the wheel, but instead to leverage existing products, especially those delivered by third party vendors. Invest in what does not already exist and contract with third party vendors for what does.

This is also a time to explore the serving of e-businesses, such as Esports. While manufacturing has been a big part of many contract training units, it may be time to learn more about businesses that may not be as drastically impacted by a pandemic and are the businesses of the future.

**Partnering:** Time has been dedicated to connecting with community partners, as well as with third party vendors. The Chamber of Commerce is a partner example, through which free webinars are being delivered and the Chamber may be funding the instructor and delivery cost.

Part of the partnering strategy is to engage with partners who have access to potential clients who do not know much about the contract training unit. The goal is to make the partnerships win-win.

**Grant Opportunities:** Contract training units have been researching grants for future contract services, as well as working with existing grant providers to rework the delivery and timeline to ensure deliverable requirements are met.

Some contract training units have been identifying for business and industry scholarship monies that can be utilized for their employees. These monies may come from state of province funds, or from the unit's institution.

**Reshaping Business and Planning Ahead:** Contract training units are dedicating time to getting their "house in order" by implementing selling,

product development and operations best practices, as well as building plans for the upcoming fiscal year so they can "hit the ground running".

Many contract training leaders reported the pandemic "blowing their budgets" and their need to figure out how to reduce costs and realistically budget for the upcoming year. What will be the new metrics for the next few years was a common question.

### **Conclusion**

The services provided by contract training units are critical to their clients and community. More than any continuing education unit, contract training units have experienced the ups and downs of economic shifts. But the COVID-19 pandemic is a new rollercoaster ride that is requiring dedication, persistence and creativity.

The sharing done by industry contract training leaders has generated a listing of actions any contract training unit can utilize, but at the same time has demonstrated everyone is in the same boat. Just knowing that others are working as hard as you to serve business and industry is motivational.

It is important to use this time to keep telling your story to your institution. Yes you are mission critical, but your institution is most likely to be looking for ways to reduce costs. Maybe today you are not generating revenue, but the potential is there. Talk about what you are doing, what you know others are doing, what you are hearing from your clients, and what will best position your contract training unit for future success.

Stay positive. Stay focused. No one is doing for the business and industry community what you are doing.

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