

# How to acquire new skills during the lockdown

**Disruption to how we live and work may make it more important than ever to upskill**

By Peter McGuire

When digital marketer Jeremy Haynes tweeted recently about the opportunity to learn new skills during the pandemic, he didn't expect the message to go viral.

“If you don't come out of this quarantine with either:

“(1) a new skill

“(2) starting what you've been putting off like a new business

“(3) more knowledge

“You didn't ever lack the time, you lacked the discipline.”.

In one of over 4,600 replies to Haynes's tweet, psychiatrist and writer Dr Benjamin Janaway said: “I think you lack self-appraisal and a working social conscience.”



Polly Wiseman responded to Haynes: “Now is not the time to hustle. Now is the time to acknowledge that people are dying, take stock of where we’re at in Western society and vow to be more humane going forward – not keep on with the same old panicky capitalistic hustle.”

So, does Haynes have a point? Is it more important than ever to up-skill? Or is the pressure to be productive – including online learning – an extra burden in a time when many of us are struggling to simply stay afloat?

Conor McGuckin is a professor of educational psychology at Trinity College Dublin.

“Through the last recession, people still needed a reason to get up in the morning, have a shower, get dressed and have a purpose for your day – this can be psychologically important,” he says.

“It’s not about the money, it’s about keeping routine and purpose. How people are feeling at the moment (anxious or stressed) is normal; it’s the outside world that is abnormal. Social media can become an echo chamber of what people can have achieved: look, I learned to play the ukulele or sing a song.

“For many of us, we just need to ask: did we survive today? Are we happy with each other? Do we have the basics to meet our needs? Is there bread, milk and shelter?”

### **Hierarchy of needs**

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is a basic psychological concept that explains how humans need to satisfy their basic physiological needs (air, clothing, food, shelter, sleep, reproduction, water) before we can address our safety needs such as employment, health and personal security.

Only when these needs are addressed can we focus on love and belonging and self-esteem – and only then can we consider self-actualisation, or the desire to become the most that we can be. With our most basic needs under threat, it’s quite understandable that some of us find the idea of taking on a new course too daunting.

“That said, some of us may have extra space where they feel they can do something educational or vocational,” says Mc Guckin.

“The wonderful thing about being human is that we keep growing and developing. Get through the basics first and if you have spare capacity maybe you could read, do a task, make a picture, listen to an audiobook or podcast.”

With Covid-19 having an impact on many different sectors including media, hospitality and aviation – to name but a few – should some of us be looking to retrain anyway?

“A lot of people will get their employment back as restrictions ease but there is a cohort who won’t,” says Andrew Brownlee, CEO of Solas, the further education and training agency, which has been adapting its courses so they can be delivered online.

“We have a big challenge to support those people to get into the work they want to do and are working to help them.

“While jobs might not be obsolete, many will be different, we always say that education is a lifelong process and people should always consider upskilling and retraining whether we’re in a crisis, recession or boom.”

### **‘Appetite to learn’**

In the early stages of the crisis, Solas immediately moved to make learning available online and to use the phone to keep in contact with more vulnerable groups as well as people who don’t have smartphones or devices.

The organisation also took the decision to use eCollege.ie, which focuses on digital and project management skills.

“We normally had 500 or 600 a month on these courses but we now have 12,300 people enrolled, which does show an appetite to learn and engage [during this pandemic],” says Brownlee.

“Education doesn’t end after college; it’s a lifelong process and there are many ways to engage throughout your life – so if you don’t feel able to engage right now, that’s okay, there will be plenty of time to learn in the years to come.”

Jean O'Brien is founder of Digital Charity Lab which provides training, resources and supports to charities, as well as a number of e-learning courses.

“I can relate to people who might have trouble focusing at the moment,” she says.

### **Podcasts**

“But there is so much learning that suits different learning styles, and you don't have to do an online course that lasts three solid days.

“It could be a 15-minute burst of e-learning or a five-minute video.

“If you have a library card, there are lots of free online courses and you could take on an area that isn't necessarily vocational or that has exams – something you wouldn't normally have the time to do – such as art history or philosophy.”

Podcasts can be a great learning opportunity because you can listen while you're doing other things, says O'Brien.

“There are lots of professional and industry podcasts. If you work in communications, marketing or charities, for instance, the podcast You Are Not So Smart is about cognitive biases and why some messages work when others don't. Ultimately, do what you can and don't worry about a big course; there have never been more ways to learn.”

\* eCollege.ie: Interactive online learning and industry-certified courses from Solas, available 24/7 with support from qualified tutors from Monday to Friday. Currently free. Courses include office productivity, computer programming, data science, web and graphic design and Irish language. Courses range in length. See eCollege.ie for more info.

\* GoHighbrow.com: Don't fancy a time commitment right now? Wake up every morning to a new 5-minute lesson delivered to your email inbox. Over 300 topics to choose from.

\* KhanAcademy.org: Almost 7,000 free videos and lectures on a wide range of topics for people of all ages. Practice exercises, instructional videos and a personalised learning dashboard form key parts of the platform.

\* Coursera.org: This database of massive online open courses (MOOCs) allows learners to take a full course from a range of universities world-wide. Courses are low-cost or free and include all the major academic disciplines. The certification isn't the point; learning and upskilling is what matters here.

\* Alison.com: Over 1,000 free courses from providers across the world are available from this highly-respected, Galway-based company. The nine categories include IT, language, science, health, humanities, business, maths, marketing and lifestyle.

\* Mooc-list.com: If you're looking to filter free online courses by country (including Ireland), course provider or course length, this website is a very useful tool that easily directs learners to what they need.

\* DigitalCharityLab.org/elearning: With charities having to move online for fundraising, Digital Charity Lab is currently offering three online courses aimed at those in the non-profit sector including digital marketing, Google Grant Adwords and email marketing. Courses are very affordable (at time of writing, the most expensive was €24.99).

\* Books: If learning from screens isn't your thing, MacArthur genius grant winner Lynda Barry's books What If, Picture This and Making Comics are really gorgeous manuals for writing and drawing. And, indeed, don't forget that we can often learn as much from books as we can from any certified course.

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