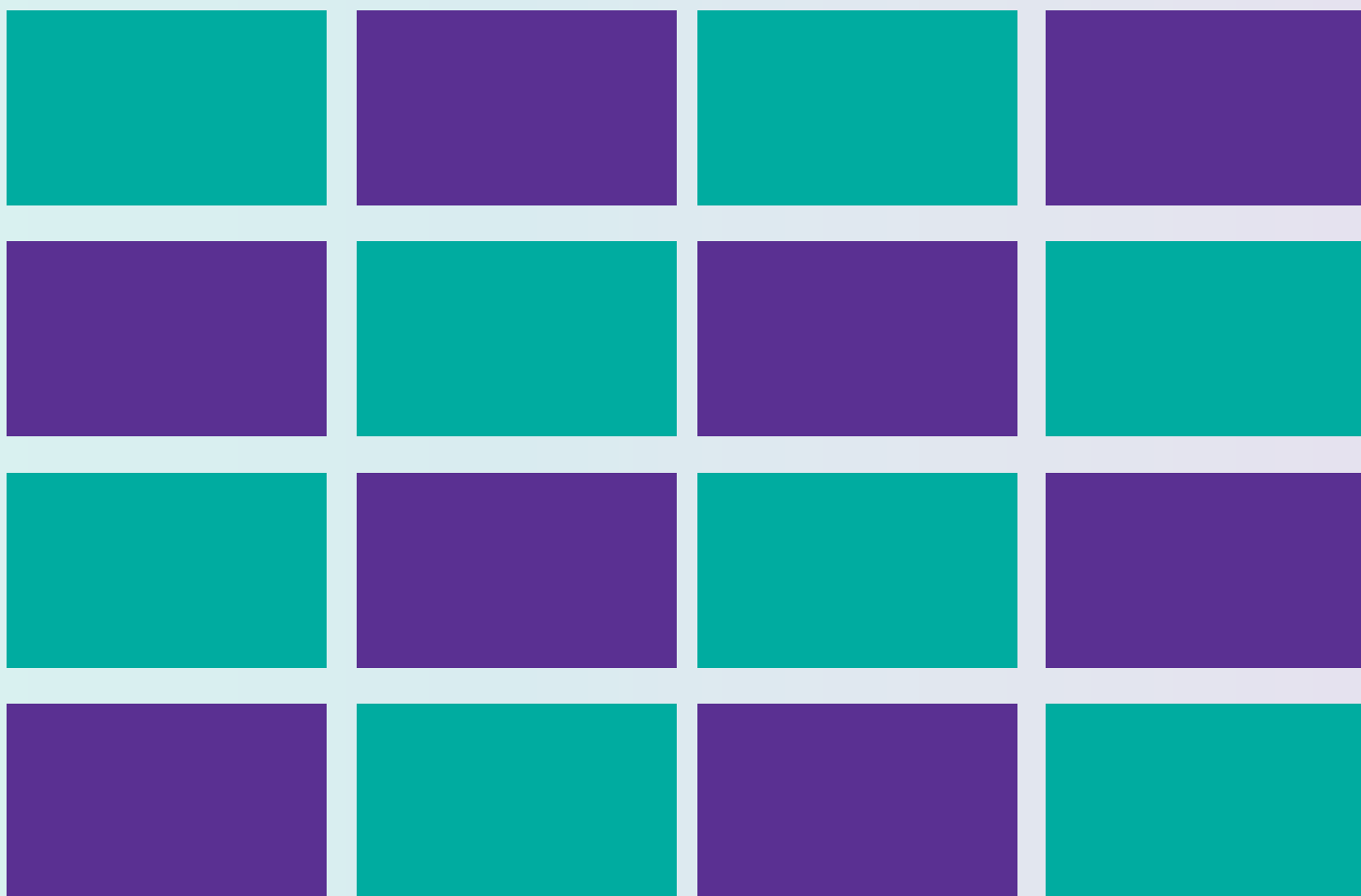


Virtually Developing:

Exploring the Potential and Pitfalls
of Online Professional Development
and Adult Learning



January 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Virtually Developing: Executive Summary

Introduction

During summer and fall 2020, Rosov Consulting engaged in a multifaceted study of 13 Jewish adult learning and professional development programs that shifted their offerings online due to COVID-19 (nine are part of the Jim Joseph Foundation Professional Development Initiative, four are from other Jim Joseph Foundation grantees). In the first stage of our research, we interviewed program providers about the challenges they faced in moving to online learning, the positive “silver linings” of the virtual experience, and the longer-term impacts of reimagining how they do their work. In the second stage, we explored the experiences of and impacts on program participants through a survey of more than 1,600 participants and follow-up interviews with 14 of them. The programs included both those specifically for educators and Jewish professionals as well as general adult Jewish learning open to all. We sought to understand the personal and professional impacts of online learning; the strengths and limitations of the experience, particularly as compared to in-person learning; and what facilitates and impedes learning through virtual modalities.

Strengths and Benefits of Online Learning

Expanded Access Increases Learning Opportunities and Diversity of Participants

The accessibility of online programming is by far its most unique aspect and, for many participants, the most valuable. In interviews and survey comments, participants highlighted the benefits of being able to access programs without having to consider **location or logistics**. They also

appreciated the **flexibility of online programming** that allowed them to “pop in and out” and fit the programs into their lives. Some also noted the increased **accessibility of programming for people who need accommodations** that are not always feasible when learning in person. Several respondents also appreciated that **lower registration fees and no travel costs** made online programs much **more affordable**. Parents of young children were grateful for the opportunity to **attend programs while also engaging in childcare**. All these factors contributed to increased diversity among attendees due to lowered barriers for program entry and ongoing participation.

From the provider side, all of the organizations we spoke with have found that moving online has expanded their audience and reach. Many have seen their now-virtual programs transcend prior geographic boundaries or niche appeal to attract diverse participants from around the world. Others are reaching entirely new populations of learners who now have greater time and/or motivation to participate. Finally, the online format facilitates access and convenience for educators and presenters as well as learners, as organizations are able to bring in speakers who might not have been able to appear in person but have an hour or two to join a Zoom call.

Increased Knowledge and Skills for Learners and Educators

Overall, 79% of survey respondents across all program types agreed or strongly agreed that they “gained new knowledge” from their online learning programs. Interview and survey comments suggest that this learning is often directed toward augmenting specific skills, in

particular specific technical skills, techniques, and strategies that enhanced their professional work. Some felt that the online format allowed for the transmission of specific information, content, and skills in ways that may have been even more efficient and focused than in-person equivalents. Program leaders have also had to gain comfort and skill with online modalities to be able to teach effectively, and a number of organizations have provided professional development for staff to help them become more skilled and creative at engaging learners online.

More Room for Experimentation and Creativity

While pivoting programming online was a strategy borne of necessity not choice, many organizations have ended up welcoming the opportunity to exercise their creativity. Some have experimented with program structures that would have been hard to conduct in person, such as daily “micro-sessions” for meditation or text study, or “drop-in” hours for mentoring or conversation with peers. Having to re-envision multi-day immersive retreats as a series of virtual sessions spread over weeks has also inspired new thinking about how to deliver content and keep participants engaged over time. Many of the interviewees reported that their programs became “savvier” and more creative over time by incorporating feedback and anticipating and adapting to participants’ needs. It’s not surprising that many program providers anticipate that their future programming will be a hybrid of in-person and virtual opportunities, and that their investments in expanding online learning capabilities will strengthen their organizations.

Limits and Challenges of Online Learning

For Most, Virtual Connections Are Less Satisfying

Despite the dedication and creativity that organizations invested in moving programs and

events online, many program providers and participants deeply feel the loss of in-person connections. While people can connect online via breakout groups and other strategies, it is very difficult to replicate the experience of getting to know a new colleague over lunch, reflecting with fellow learners in the hallway after a session, receiving informal mentoring from an instructor, or even connecting with a unique space and setting as part of the learning process.

Online Learners Are Often More Distracted and Less Engaged

Another frequent criticism of online learning was the difficulty staying focused due to distractions in the home environment and/or the mental challenges of too much screen time. In interviews and survey comments, several participants spoke of feeling what one called “the classic challenge of Zoom fatigue.” Other participants highlighted the challenge of balancing learning with competing family and home responsibilities. While participants appreciated what their programs had been able to offer, a number expressed that there was simply “no comparison” between the experience of online learning and the dynamic energy and depth of engagement that can be achieved in person.

Cohort Programs Can Offer an Effective Hybrid Model

Many of the long-term cohort programs we studied had already incorporated quite a bit of online learning and interaction from the start as a way to connect their geographically scattered members. However, as many participants emphasized, the virtual elements only worked because the groups came together in person initially and periodically during the program to launch and then deepen relationships. A solely online program, they felt, could not provide a truly satisfying cohort experience. Thus, they were grateful that they had the opportunity to forge connections with

each other before their programs went entirely virtual. By combining the two modalities, cohort programs can offer the best of learning both in person (meaningful relationship building) and online (convenience, flexibility, and diverse participation).

Online vs. In-Person: A Valuable Role for Each

The choice to deliver professional development or Jewish learning online or in-person—or in combination—should be driven by two factors: the primary goals of the learning experience and the intended audience. For in-depth engagement and developing meaningful relationships and networks, in-person experiences (both one-time conferences and longer programs) are generally superior. However, online programs greatly expand opportunities for those whose locations, work and family commitments, financial circumstances, or other life realities do not easily allow them to travel and/or make time for learning and professional development. Programs and educators have made enormous strides this year in harnessing technology to deliver valuable content to thousands of learners across the globe.

The shifts programs have made to preserve Jewish learning and professional development during the pandemic can offer a valuable model in which online learning is a meaningful complement to (but not a substitute for) in-person connections and engagement. Moving forward, if programs embrace a spirit of “both/and” rather than “either/or”—matching approaches to needs, goals, and populations—they will continue to both deepen and broaden learning and development opportunities and thus have a beneficial impact on the field as a whole.

Organizations Participating in Study

Ayeka

Hadar Institute

Hillel International

HUC-JIR School of Education

The iCenter

JCC Association of North America

JPRO Network

M²: Institute for Experiential Jewish Education

Makom

Moishe House

Moving Traditions

Shalom Hartman Institute of North America

SVARA

The Jewish Education Project



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