

The Acceleration of Digital Learning: A Q&A With Ian Schnoor, President & Founder of The Marquee Group

By Bill Berger, Luciana Andrade and Josh Rudolph

While the pandemic forced many organizations to fundamentally rethink their offerings to survive, others were able to adapt, and even expand despite the challenges posed by the past year. We sat down with Ian Schnoor, President & Founder of The Marquee Group, Canada's leading provider of financial modeling training and consulting, to learn about how COVID-19 forced them to pivot their successful in-person financial modeling courses online – in turn making it available and on demand to a global audience.

Q: The COVID-19 pandemic impacted many businesses. Tell us how The Marquee Group responded and adapted?

A: Our organization had historically focused on in-person training and consulting. We ran our financial modelling courses at banks, pension funds, business schools, and law firms all over North America. When the pandemic hit, everything shut down, and we were hit hard. Our clients cancelled all in-person training, and all of our consulting clients, who we create models for, put everything on pause.

Early on in the pandemic, we made the decision to try and pivot to virtual based training through platforms like Zoom. We changed more in three months than we would have in years, and invested an enormous amount of energy in learning Zoom's platform to understand all of its capabilities. We spent a lot of time thinking about transition, delivery and approach in a virtual classroom -- knowing that training would not be the same virtually as it was in person.

Then all of our bank clients decided to move forward with their new hire training programs in a virtual format. They realized that we wouldn't be back in-person anytime soon, so they decided to give it a shot, and it went extremely well. That allowed us to get back on track. And there's been tremendous upside and new opportunities since.

Q: COVID-19 has accelerated the adoption of digital learning. Tell us about the practices you've put in place to engage with your clients or find new ones.

A: Going virtual resulted in us accelerating our thinking around three major pillars at The Marquee Group. First, our reach and customer base expanded.



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Technology has allowed us to expand our reach globally across time zones. Day or night, I can now teach anywhere in the world from the comfort of my home in Toronto. Previously, if we were needed on the

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other side of the world, it was a big effort and time commitment to get there. Since the pandemic began, I have conducted webinars on financial modelling in over 40 different countries.

The second major development was in the format of how we delivered our training. In a virtual environment, we discovered you have a lot more creativity in delivery. We’ve developed a micro-learning approach, where we break the content and training into bite-sized chunks. In the past, a training session would have spanned multiple days. Now, we take that same content and deliver it over a number of half-days to make it more manageable and engaging.

Finally, we launched a new self-study platform. We took a bunch of our courses and we quickly digitized them into a video-based format. This platform is now being used by people all over the world. The courses can be used as standalone courses or, if we are doing a live training session, we can incorporate them into the course work. This blended approach of synchronous and asynchronous work makes for a very enjoyable learning experience.

Through the pandemic, we’ve learned that you can do more creative and interesting things in a virtual setting and develop relationships anywhere. For example, we recently formed a partnerships with UK-based Kaplan Performance Academy, a world-class digital environment that hosts custom-tailored learning, and US-based Wiley, a multibillion-dollar publishing house with roughly 200 years in the market. Having those two giant names in the field of education endorse us, and deliver our financial modelling course, is a game-changer. Levering their platforms will allow our content to reach a wider customer base and allow us to expand our reach globally. At Foglers, Bill Berger has been instrumental at helping us navigate all of the partnership arrangements with our various global partners. I have known Bill for a long time and he is a trusted advisor.

Q: Peering into your post-COVID-19 crystal ball – what trends do you see for your industry?

A: One thing the pandemic has taught us is that it is really tough to predict the future. It was tough to predict what would happen when COVID first hit. It’s good to have contingency plans but not to overdo them because you never know the way things are going to shape up. We did not know a year and a half ago if our clients would embrace virtual learning -- they did, and we did a great job delivering it.

I like to think that blended and online learning will be here to stay. Our clients, for instance, realized huge efficiencies as they did not have to fly people from all over the world to attend in-person training. It saved a lot of time and money. Pre-COVID, nobody would have ever asked us to run a virtual training section. COVID forced us to work virtually, have virtual meetings and run training sessions virtually. The Zoom

technology has been around for 10 years or more -- but nobody considered it “socially acceptable” to use it for training before.

After a long hiatus, we are about to run our first in-person sessions in Los Angeles and New York. Both those events will be hybrid with participants attending both in person and online. The difference is that all the participants will be on Zoom - even the ones in the same room, and everyone is going to be seeing the instructor’s screen. They will not be looking at a big screen at the front of the room anymore or patched in on a conference line - instead, they will be looking at their own laptops. This hybrid approach creates a flexible learning environment. It was all possible with Zoom before COVID, but no one ever thought or asked to do it that way. The pandemic changed the game and we discovered other modalities where we could connect and learn together.

To learn more about The Marquee Group and their financial modeling training and consulting, visit www.marqueegroup.ca ■

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