

Distance Learning Improves Performance in Troubled Times

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Face it: Even the healthiest companies must make dramatic reductions in staff and overall spending to remain viable in what may be the worst economy most of us will see in our lifetimes.

As staff is cut, more is asked of those who remain. Most times, these additional responsibilities call for new skills. Yet with training budgets slashed, many employees can't cultivate the required competencies at a time when they need them most. Traditional classroom training usually commands the lion's share of time and money, so it's often the first training to be cut. As a result, many organizations are looking to distance learning solutions to replace classroom training. Selecting the right combination of technologies and tools is one thing. But to actually achieve the most critical performance goals via virtual training is quite another, especially when it comes to crucial "soft skills."

This edition of *Communiqué*, co-authored by my colleague Julia Young of Facilitate.com, maps out several important steps to creating a successful multifaceted distance learning program. Our starting premise: Simply throwing a slide presentation onto a website, while it may be fast and inexpensive, almost never achieves the intended results. Instead, it's a thoughtfully-created program that encompasses a variety of learning activities that can cultivate skills and accelerate time to practical application.

1. **Clarify your learning objectives and performance goals by audience.** This will help determine the best methods and relative intensity of training. For example, say that one of your objectives is to strengthen the ability of your organization to collaborate more easily and quickly in a virtual world. Some people may need a mastery of remote team leadership skills, while others may require greater aptitude in planning and running virtual meetings. By differentiating objectives by audience, you can determine who needs the "superset" of all available options and who needs certain components. As a result, you can create a series of standalone modules that can be "snapped" together for certain audiences on a "just-in-time" basis.
2. **Quantify the sense of urgency.** Find out how quickly certain people need to cultivate particular skills, and determine which of these must come first, and which can be developed later. Also consider whether people need time to apply certain skills in a real-life job situation before tackling yet another new set of skills. Know whether all employees will need to learn the same things in parallel, or whether they can learn first

and later act as mentors. Knowing how many people need to be trained, during what period of time, will have a big impact on your design. By creating manageable "bites" of learning in the form of repeatable modules, those who need the training can pick it up when they need it most, from wherever they work.

3. **Select delivery methods to match learning objectives.** For each performance objective, consider how working knowledge can best be cultivated. To effectively lead remote teams, for example, the ability to create trust is essential. Learning how to create trust won't easily come from a self-paced, computer-based training module or reference guide. A facilitated conversation among experienced managers and peers, followed by coaching and perhaps an online forum for sharing tips, is far more likely to do the job. For each performance objective, consider what skills or topics are most important and how they can best be delivered. Make sure to build in time for people to absorb some information offline, to make the best use of precious real-time interactions. For example, people can watch a video or listen to a Podcast on their own time and then join with a group in real-time to discuss, explore, ask and answer questions, or work on a case study or simulation.
4. **Look for technologies that will create interactive learning environments even at a distance.** Scheduling a subject matter expert to deliver an informative, detailed slide presentation via con call may seem to be an efficient, low-cost way to comport knowledge to a large number of people. But in the absence of an engaging, interactive learning experience, people who will slip away to check email or do their "real" work, will. The frequent result: A waste of time, money and resources for participants, leaders, and training managers. The biggest loss: A missed opportunity for people to absorb vital skills that can sharpen performance in increasingly tough business conditions. Employ a variety of learning methods, such as asynchronous participation in a virtual conference room, conference call, web meeting tools, shared portals, and social networking applications as you design your learning program.
5. **Insist that managers be part of this "action learning" process.** Managers need to be involved in a number of ways. Among them: articulate how performance goals will contribute to business outcomes; make it possible for employees to invest the needed time to develop skills; provide coaching to reinforce skills in a supportive environment; and reporting on the success of the learning program in achieving performance goals.
6. **Create small teams to foster continuous learning.** Form relatively small teams around learning activities and deliverables, such as action research, case studies, discussion of materials, presenting recommendations, and delivering focused feedback. Small teams provide participants with a supportive environment in which they can practice new skills, accelerate knowledge and forge a new community of practitioners. People work best when they have a chance to reflect, discuss and apply what they have learned in small break-out groups. Design break-out teams into your distance learning program whenever possible.
7. **Make learning easy to apply in real-life situations.** When people can immediately practice new skills, they're far more likely to pay attention, remain engaged, and remember what they've learned. Build your training program around your audiences'

real challenges, issues and needs. This way, the training program gives them an opportunity to actually get needed work done while learning a new skill. The result: More enthusiastic participation by both employees and managers. For example, when training people how to plan and run effective remote meetings, use the training as an opportunity to model best virtual meeting practices by optimizing phone and web meeting tools as part of the learning experience. Create case studies that enable people to solve the kind of issues they're wrestling with in reality, versus creating overly generic scenarios that will have little meaning to most people. When learning from a distance, people are more likely to be engaged when the learning activities are directly related to their real work.

8. **Practice continuous improvement.** Refine and revise your learning programs continually. A training solution that works beautifully today may fall flat 6 or 12 months from now. Things change, including business needs, demographics of your employee base, new technologies, and learning priorities. Build a feedback loop into your learning program that goes beyond the usual quick survey that immediately follows a training session. Think about how you, your participants and their managers can realistically determine if the training had its intended impact over time. This information can help ensure that the program is always finely-tuned to best meet the needs of audiences who need new skills the most.

As organizations move much of their classroom-led training to the virtual world, traditional training and management roles are becoming blurred. Many trainers, whose work might have ended at 5 PM in the classroom, are being asked to take on the role of consultant and coach as distance learning programs incorporate multiple learning experience spread over time. Meanwhile, as training and travel budgets are slashed, on-the-job training is becoming a necessity, where managers take on the role of trainer, coach and guide. When choosing the right blend of distance learning activities, make sure that everyone involved understands the performance goals, their roles, and how their contributions fit in the overall process.

Links: Choosing the optimum combination of technologies and tools is just one part of the challenge to creating a great distance learning solution, but it's a vital one. Here's a helpful snapshot that maps different learning types to suggested technology tools.

<http://www.facilitate.com/support/facilitator-toolkit/docs/FacComBlendedLearningTools.pdf>

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