

Lesson of the virtual classroom

Synchronous training holds the promise of reduced travel time and cost. However, to make these potential gains a reality, careful planning and analysis are required.

Picture it. You have an audience of 5000 people spread across three continents. You are in the midst of planning the roll-out of a new project tracking application to your employees. Your workforce must quickly gain proficiency in both new software and business practices soon to be unveiled. Budgets are tight. You have heard about a new training tool that could save you millions in travel costs by linking trainers and students through the internet. Classes are conducted over the web, thereby eliminating the need for employees to travel to centralised training. You think you have found the solution. Or have you?

Virtual instructor-led training

Over the past few years, there has been increasing interest in using synchronous tools to conduct training, so-called 'virtual instructor-led training' (VILT). Synchronous tools share content (typically in the form of PowerPoint slides) over the web to a class of geographically distributed students. Instructors control courses from afar using electronic response tools to poll the audience and gather feedback.

The potential upside of VILT is apparent: warp-speed roll-outs, elimination of travel costs, decreased time away from work travelling to training and so on. Benefits such as these are enticing even the most traditional corporate training organisations to take notice. However, it is important to remember that VILT, in common with any learning platform, is not a cure-all. It yields best results when integrated as part of an overall blended learning strategy with careful planning and education. Having conducted more than 200 VILT-based training programmes, Tech Research Group offers the following tips for companies considering to use VILT:

- **Recognise that VILT is an infrastructure commitment.** VILT involves more than the purchase or licensing of synchronous software. Audience members must have high-speed (broadband) internet access or dual phone lines to enable smooth serving of audio and data simultaneously.
- **Know your audience.** Is your audience ready to learn virtually? Do your learners have the commitment to put aside distractions such as email? Be realistic about your expectations; true 'participation' and 'engagement' are two of the most difficult elements to gauge and track with a VILT event.

- **Evaluate your options.** The choice of a training delivery method should be made with a conscious evaluation of options. While cost is an important factor, the learning objective, learner characteristics, infrastructure and content type are important factors as well. Ask: how well does the delivery medium accomplish the learning objective for this type of content? What are the full costs of choosing one delivery mode over another? A careful analysis of your business requirements, your objectives and available choices should lead you to the best and highest return choice of delivery mode.
- **Remember instructional design basics.** The availability of the internet to conduct training does not change how adults learn or what motivates them to learn. As you contemplate VILT for a particular initiative, consider how it fits with how the target audience learns. For example, while it may be reasonable to utilise application sharing for demonstration, it does not readily provide for en masse hands-on practice. Understand what learning objectives are reasonable to accomplish through VILT in consideration of how adults learn.
- **Plan for success.** As with any facilitated training event, VILT must be carefully orchestrated. It is important that your audience has not only downloaded the synchronous tool in advance of the training event, but is practised and knowledgeable in how to use it. Instructors should be formally trained in online instruction, and facilitators available to answer session chat. Course designers should understand the dynamics of virtual events and structure the class accordingly.

By following these tips, a company has a greater chance of achieving success when incorporating VILT in its corporate learning programme. ■

AUTHOR

Kristina Markstrom is a director of client services with North Carolina-based (USA) Tech Resource Group, which has been providing training and support solutions to life sciences organisations since 1993.