Chapter 32  
Reflections on the Design and Delivery of Online Corporate Training

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Abstract  Corporate training in Cyprus has been traditionally delivered exclusively via face-to-face sessions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a large part of online training was implemented online. Indeed, the pandemic has accelerated several transformations of the education sector, including professional development. Our team at the Institute of Development has been offering trainings and seminars to business and industry for the last 20 years. One of the areas we have been designing and delivering training is on performance management. In this brief reflection chapter, we will share our experiences on adapting a face-to-face training program for full online synchronous delivery. We begin with a brief description of the context, course and target groups. We then reflect on some of the key challenges and opportunities we see in adapting traditional face-to-face sessions online. We close the chapter by offering practical tips based on our experiences in designing and delivering the course.

32.1 Description of Context

Good performance management is an important characteristic of successful organizations. Training on such issues usually includes establishing clear goals and SMART objectives, defining key metrics and KPIs, developing appropriate mechanisms for feedback, coaching, and evaluation. Providing training to management teams on these processes should also provide opportunities to understand the key concepts, view case studies and scenarios, engage in practice and role play, provide feedback, and coach their teams. This training was developed and delivered by the first author (VC from the Institute of Development) to the largest non-profit in Cyprus (CARDET).
CARDET is the largest independent non-profit in the eastern Mediterranean region, with core expertise in online education and digital learning. The centre’s team has completed numerous projects relating to virtual schooling, digital literacies, online education, and MOOCs. Online education projects were implemented in more than 30 countries, several of which were supported by the European Commission, the United Nations Development Program, Microsoft, The Commonwealth of Learning, international agencies and governments around the world. The main training objective was to build the skills and competences of managers to design and implement appropriate performance management systems in their organization. The training was offered to the senior management team of CARDET (10 managers). The trainees were individuals of the CARDET management team (line managers) who will both be evaluated themselves and will have the role of evaluator, so it was important to be fully prepared to understand and manage the new performance evaluation and goal setting system adopted by CARDET. The managers were engaged in the restructuring of the organization and establishing a solid performance management system. The majority of them are experts in online teaching and learning, since it is the primary focus of the organization. Therefore, there was no real need to prepare them for the online course. The duration of the training was 14 h delivered within a week, offered over a period of four days (3.5 h per day excluding breaks). The platform used for delivery was ZOOM, which allowed for synchronous delivery, breakout rooms, and integration of other tools such as polls and screen sharing.

The training agenda included:

- Performance management planning, detailed explanation of the company’s competency framework, and practice in writing SMART objectives
- Monitoring performance, identifying critical incidents, stimulating employee motivation and engagement.
- Handling poor performance and giving constructive feedback, coaching skills, introduction to the GROW model, and practice in coaching skills
- Preparing for the appraisal interview, handling disagreements with difficult employees, and building appraiser skills.

Examples of activities used included: brief 15 min presentations of key issues by the trainer, short 5–7 videos with examples and case studies, quick quizzes and learning competitions using KAHOOT, polls, teamwork in breakout rooms with reporting back to the whole class, role play using case studies, and brief reflections sessions at the end of each day. For example, one of the activities included the role-playing of case studies of employees of varying levels of performance and the practicing of giving feedback, in breakout rooms. During this activity, participants could experience what it means to be the appraiser, appraisee, and observer.
32.2 Challenges and Opportunities

The biggest challenge was that we had to offer the training only in a synchronous mode, in order to comply with the local Cyprus Human Development Authority and qualify for the government subsidize for the costs of the training. We could not provide for asynchronous activities and engagement of learners at their own pace and time. This limited the kinds of activities we could design and implement. It can be very tiring for groups to be online synchronously for long periods of time. One of the key advantages of online delivery is the flexibility. Hence, requiring all participants to engage in a synchronous mode was not the best approach. In order to address this, we developed several activities and frequent breaks to allow for participants to interact, engage and get the most out of the learning experience.

Another challenge had to do with the lack of physical presence for coaching sessions and role-play during which a team leader would conduct performance evaluation, provide feedback and coach a member of the team. Although live video conferencing is a good alternative, the immediacy of interaction in physical presence in dealing with issues of performance management, is important. During the debriefing session at the end of the training, one of the managers stated that during role-play, although live conferencing worked well, the immediacy of interaction during face-to-face meetings supports the communication and discussion better, particularly when dealing with controversial issues. For example, when a manager has to give negative feedback and then coach a team member, this is easier to do in face-to-face settings.

Furthermore, in a face-to-face setting, it is difficult for trainees to disengage when a good trainer is leading the program. Online, it is difficult for the trainer to monitor all learners and ensure they are engaged and not distracted by their social media posts and newsfeeds. Regardless of these challenges, overall the participants appreciated the frequent opportunities for live interaction, discussion, and role-play.

On the other hand, online delivery offers tremendous opportunities for the ongoing professional development of teams. The flexibility offered that allows team members from all around Cyprus to join online without the need to leave their home as very valuable, particularly for those who had children at home and during the pandemic they could not leave them unattended. Furthermore, being able to record the training session and all activities allows managers to review all discussions and exercises again, and reflect on their own role-play performance.

Another aspect that worked well, was that the large majority of training methods that were initially designed for face-to-face settings were easily adapted and used in the online synchronous training. Participants appreciated the fact that they could connect online during the lockdown (because of COVID-19), from the safety of their homes. The practical, hands-on aspects of the training, during which learners used role-play to practice coaching and giving feedback using case study scenarios, where the parts that learners enjoyed the most. Some of the case study videos were a bit too long but, overall, the group’s engagement was high. During a training evaluation, 90% of the participants indicated the training fully achieved its objectives.
32.3 Recommendations and Reflections

Reflecting on the implementation and listening to the feedback from participants, the training was successful, considering the trainer of the seminar (lead author) had extensive experience in traditional face-to-face corporate training, but limited experience in online training. The second author (CV) who has extensive expertise in online education supported the process. He designed his first online course in 1996, using the system First Class, and in 2000, he led a team that designed a full online Master’s Degree and a Virtual High School. As the leader of the CARDET team, he worked closely with the trainers and first author to design and adapt the training for synchronous online delivery. Below we offer some basic practical tips and recommendations based on what we learned:

- Choose the right technology tools that are simple to use, reliable and appropriate for your target audience. In our case, we used ZOOM and, in some cases, KAHOOT for online polls, and gamification of the user experience. The use of gamification increased engagement, and at the end of each session, there was a small fun competition among participants to measure and provide feedback on knowledge acquisition.
- Design specifically for online collaboration and require participants to work in groups to discuss and contribute to the issues of the course. Participation in the online discussions, chat rooms, message boards, breakout rooms, and role play needs to be carefully planned with all criteria and processes communicated to the participants. The instructor needs to ensure that online training sessions encourage interaction and inclusivity.
- When choosing group members and forming teams, pair expert learners with less experienced learners to collaborate in the group sessions. This is particularly challenging online, given the varying technology expertise of some of the team members.
- Use polls as a means to give opportunities to learners to engage and contribute to the discussions, interact, reflect, and even evaluate their knowledge. Polls are very good for individuals to compare themselves to others, to gain feedback on knowledge or understanding, and to set norms. They often substitute for some face-to-face equivalents, such as gaining consensus from the group with a show of hands, etc.
- The share screen function needs to be tested well, and the resolution of graphics and quality of videos and sound need to be carefully selected. In a couple of occasions when the videos used were of high quality, because of low bandwidth from some of the participants, the quality of playback was poor.
- Engaging synchronously for extended periods is a challenge for both the trainer and the learners. Use creative energisers/icebreakers that can be done remotely and synchronously.
- Break the training into brief sessions, not longer than one hour with at least 10–15 min breaks. Being online for long periods can be tiring for the learner and trainers. Embedding short videos in the training adds variety to the content, and is
a quick way to present a topic, explain a process, or present some expert opinion on the topics of the course.

- The facilitator skills are critical for the success of synchronous online discussions. The trainer should utilize a variety of group management strategies and digital tools that promote the development of a safe, learner-centered environment, group cohesion, and comfort with risk taking (such as role-playing, and commitment to common learning objectives).
- Share simple tutorials and video demos of the tools to be used to help learners get up to speed. In our case, we shared some simple tips and videos on how to engage with ZOOM and how to participate in the break out rooms, and online polls.
- Interchange between a variety of activities to keep learners engaged. For example, we used simple 10-min presentations, followed by a group discussion in break out rooms, and then the whole class together reflection. We tried to keep the talking of the trainer to a minimum to allow for participants to engage in group discussions and activities.

### 32.4 Conclusion

In this brief case study, we share our experience of adapting a traditionally face-to-face corporate training course for synchronous online delivery. It was obvious from the feedback that online training is not inferior compared with face-to-face. If designed properly with the learner in mind, it can have similar results, and at times better, at least in terms of participant satisfaction. Given the collective experience of the authors, it was a fruitful collaboration with many lessons to be learned. Readers should compare their own setting and adopt the tips and recommendations in ways that best match their needs. Online education has a powerful and huge potential. The pandemic has accelerated the adoption of online education and in many contexts around the world, and this transformation is here to stay.

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