The Benefits of Virtual Training Best Practices

A conference call dedicated to the sharing of virtual training best practices revealed a wealth of benefits characteristic to this type of training. As such, these benefits have been compiled into a report on their own for easy reference. Truly, a best practice in itself is to understand these benefits and how they can help improve the training experience while also reducing training costs.

Participants on this call were graced with the expertise of Faith LeGendre of Cisco/WebEX as the guest subject matter expert. Ms. LeGendre spoke from her experiences in her VP role within 1-800-FLOWERS.

1. Based on her personal experiences with virtual training, Ms. LeGendre shared that in the virtual environment, there is actually more collaboration between the trainees. When she introduced virtual training through the WebEX tool in her position at 1-800-FLOWERS, she saw trainees using the chat feature to discuss the material either with other trainees or with their mentor (both privately and publicly). This tended to lend itself to increased retention. In the traditional brick and mortar environment, chatting while the instructor is speaking at the head of the class is not as socially acceptable. Unfortunately, what oftentimes ends up happening is that the participant “zones out”, almost like when they are passively watching TV;

2. Virtual training offers the organization a cost-effective means of targeting trainees who are absent or had to leave the training early (provided the session has been recorded), thereby saving time, money and resources;

3. Ms. LeGendre also noticed that there are many more ways to check the knowledge of trainees inside the virtual environment. She explained that in the training with the brick and mortar class and the same training within a virtual environment, those trainers in the brick and mortar training asked fewer questions to check for knowledge than those
trainers in the virtual environment. In the virtual environment, the trainers actually asked more questions. They would do polls, a quick Q&A, they would shoot out a test or mini quiz here and there, etc. Consequently, there were more questions from the trainees. Also, since the trainers were asking more of the self-check questions, the trainees were more aware of their own learning gaps and could respond accordingly;

4. Ms. LeGendre stated that virtual learners have increased retention levels for the materials learned. She believes it is because of the interaction. Their hands, their mouse and their keyboard are constantly engaged in the training whereas in the brick and mortar, there is a lot of behavioral down time where the person is just sitting there listening and watching. They weren’t engaged or answering questions or polls or chatting with their peers like they do in the virtual environment;

5. As mentioned, virtual training results show higher retention levels. Ms. LeGendre suggested that an organization can run a small pilot to test this out. She ran two classes together with 5 trainees in each; one was the traditional brick and mortar training and the other was a virtual training class. She took care to assess their entry scores through the Wonderlic Personnel Test for intelligence. Both groups had the same scores and the same tenure new hire tenure level. This way, the results couldn’t be disputed that one class was smarter than the other. All the trainees had the same knowledge and intelligence level. The virtual class folks outperformed at the 2, 4 and 6 week mark. They were also measured at the one month mark and outperformed in sales conversion, FCR and productivity points per hour.

6. There are studies that show that when a trainee learns in the same environment in which they work, knowledge retention increases. So, if you train people in the same location that they are going to be applying the knowledge, you'll see a better retention and a better application according to these various studies. Ms. LeGendre concurs with these findings. She shared that they started to document this and realized it was the movement from where the trainee was physically learning that created a lapse in retention. What the trainee is learning needs to be in the location that he/she will be applying the skill;

7. Learning right in the call center is still a possibility, even with all the activity of any given day. Ms. LeGendre stated that her agents wore double headsets to block out all the sounds. The audio would come through a set of headsets over the phone and then they are locked in visually on the screen with massive amounts of tools. They are engaged in
the polls, engaged in the Q&A, they are chatting with their peers and with their hosted facilitator, they are breaking out into breakout sessions and communicating and doing role plays in groups of twos, etc. In the audio, they only hear each other and the facilitator, who can virtually bounce around to each of the trainees (just like they would be if they were walking around in a classroom). Furthermore, you can put up a sign that says: “Please do not disturb; I am in training.”

8. Another observation of Ms. LeGendre’s virtual training experiences is that trainees have a longer attention span with virtual training. With brick and mortar training, the learners generally start waning at about 4 hours of training, even with breaks. Ms. LeGendre had a large staff of home agents and they would actually ask for more time. They did a full 8-hour day, probably because they are used to sitting and working at home and engaging virtually at home. When they cut down the classes to 4 or 5 hours, these agents actually asked for more time. They wanted to stay on WebEX and chat and share documents with each other and continue role playing far beyond their counterparts in the traditional classroom;

9. There is less ramp-up time needed when using virtual training for those companies who engage outsourcers or shared workforce partners. This is particularly true when the equipment and the software are not loaded at these partner’s sites. When you use WebEX or any online conferencing tool, it allows them to have access to your applications and conduct all the training before IT even has the opportunity to load their systems. This is particularly helpful to meet tight training deadlines without having to be dependent upon IT;

10. The WebEX application is very user-friendly, especially if you only have dummy terminals to work with (i.e. terminals without any sound or video cards, etc);

11. Virtual training is a huge benefit if the organization has work-at-home agents, not only from a training perspective, but also in the flexibility it offers for your recruitment radius. In many cases, organizations need to stay within a 50 mile radius of their center. But with virtual training, Ms. LeGendre stated that they were able to recruit anywhere in North America where they could collect sales tax (which was in 13 different States);

12. Virtual training can help reduce your costs associated with trainers. Ms. LeGendre explained that with traditional training, she had to pay 2 trainers to work on 2 different
shifts to train 1 or 2 people at a time. With virtual training, she was able to blend in the office agents with home agent training;

13. With virtual training, you don’t need a lot of money for rewards. Being able to be the top player in a game is often reward enough for virtual training participants;

14. Virtual training allows you to cater to all the generations in your workforce. It appeals to the younger generation (because that is what they are used to and can go quickly through the training) and/or it appeals to older generations who can slow down the training if needed;

15. Recording the virtual training session offers you an indisputable and objective manner in which to coach your trainers and improve upon any of their facilitation gaps;

16. Virtual training allows the organization to address the learning styles of each individual learner, i.e. the audio, visual and textile learning styles;

17. If using mentors in your training (i.e. more seasoned agents to mentor the new hires), virtual training engages these mentors more actively. When Ms. LeGendre had mentors in the brick and mortar classroom, oftentimes they would sit off in the back of the classroom. If they did try to help an agent, it was disruptive to the class and the agent felt embarrassed. In virtual training, this can be done more discreetly with private sidebar chatting. The trainee is getting that extra assistance and no one knows it. The class keeps up better together. In Ms. LeGendre’s experience, they are much more cohesive than in a brick and mortar class.

Virtual training is a definite next step for many organizations. ROI for this type of investment is an issue, but not insurmountable given this plethora of benefits. Watch for a part two to this call that will focus more intently on building the business case and proving the ROI.