Online Training: The Advantages and Disadvantages

By Tony Buon

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Many organisations worldwide are looking at online training as a way of keeping people informed and engaged during the present pandemic. If people are unable to come together in groups or are working from home, is online training the answer? Well, it may be, in some circumstances. There are advantages and disadvantages of this mode of training delivery, however the disadvantages are not always highlighted.

Before we look at the advantages and disadvantages, lets clarify some of the terms used. There is some confusion here as there is no accepted taxonomy for all the terms used. Nevertheless, let us try to provide some clarification.

1. **Distance Learning:** Normally but not exclusively associated with educational institutions. You learn using study materials and online learning resources and may connect with other students via a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).
2. **Virtual Learning Environment (VLE):** Web-based platform for the digital aspects of courses of study, usually within educational institutions.
3. **Online learning or eLearning:** Delivering all or part of a course digitally, whether it is in a school, business training or an academic distance learning course. eLearning does not usually use traditional classroom methods.
4. **Blended Learning:** A combination of online materials and interactions combined with traditional classroom methods.
5. **Computer-Based Training** (CBT): Any course of instruction whose primary means of delivery is a computer or other internet-connected device. A CBT course (sometimes called courseware) may be delivered via a software product installed on a single computer, through an intranet, via an app, or as Web-based training.
6. **Webinars:** The term comes from "web-based seminar". A brief (1-2 hours) presentation or seminar delivered used video conferencing software (Zoom, ClickMeeting, MS Teams, etc.). These usually allow participants in different locations to see and hear the presenter, ask questions, share documents/slides and sometimes answer polls.
7. **Online Training:** This is the delivery of short training courses using video conferencing software. It involves a variety of multimedia elements, including graphics, audio, video, and web-links, which all can be accessed through the software. Courses can be on most topics, though some courses are better suited than others.

Online training has many advantages, particularly currently. There are reduced cost and increased flexibility. However, it is vital that Learning and Development professionals, HR Specialists and Leaders are aware of both the advantages and disadvantages of this type of learning. The following table is a summary of the research into this method of learning and development.

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Advantages of Online Training	Disadvantages of Online Training
Reduced cost (travel, accommodation, per diem, time, printed materials)	Can be less desirable with participants (no travel, per diem, social interaction, status)
Flexibility in delivery (timing, location, length, class size)	Requires instructors who are experienced with online training methodology. Also, some instructors find the lack of 'physical movement' limiting for their delivery.
Environmentally friendly, Fits with Sustainable leadership philosophy	Technical issues (Bandwidth, software, hardware)
During the present pandemic, demonstrates to staff that their Organisation is still concerned about their development	In some countries, a certification earned by distance and flexible learning may not be recognised by certain authorities or regulators
Effective use of downtime (e.g. when mandatory home working)	Challenging to get full engagement from participants – "Zoom/Skype Fatigue" for participants
Suitable for people who are geographically dispersed	May require more engagement and pre-work and some people are not disciplined enough for this type of learning
May have a positive impact on training budgets	Some cultural resistance. For example, one study suggested that 71% of military personnel dislike the idea of eLearning
Some studies have also demonstrated excellent cost-benefits and ROI. Can measure online Training ROI faster than traditional methods	Group interaction is awkward. Software can assist with this, but it is still not the same as face-to-face. Also, impacts of individual instructor feedback. - "Zoom/Skype Fatigue for Instructor"
Can give learners a more comprehensive understanding of the course content (when Blended)	Some activities are difficult to duplicate online (e.g. Interactive games)
Consistent with "Just in time" management philosophy. Waste is reduced.	May be difficult for courses that are longer or for certain types of courses (e.g. mediation or counselling skills training)

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