Creating Effective Learning Experiences in a Virtual Environment

Organizations around the world are having to learn to conduct business remotely. With social distancing now the norm, we must all find new and innovative ways to carry on our work even though we cannot be together in the same room.

This poses some interesting challenges for learning and development professionals. Of course, virtual learning is nothing new. Organizations have long recognized the value of webinars, e-learning courses and other virtual experiences. They save money. They cut out accommodation and travel costs. They can be condensed into shorter formats. They are scalable.

Nevertheless, there remains a deep and understandable concern that virtual formats may not be sufficient for all learning experiences.

How do you engage workshop participants effectively when you can’t even see them?

How do you make people accountable for their learning and successfully drive behavior change in a virtual environment?

And, crucially, how do you maintain the impact and momentum of learning programs that were designed to be delivered face to face?
Engagement is the number one issue when it comes to creating an effective virtual learning experience.

In our experience, many organizations that would have liked to have gone 100% virtual have held back in the past due to concerns about learner engagement and thus, accountability and behavioral change.

The question they ask is always the same: How do we get individuals to participate, engage and apply what they learn within a virtual environment?

To find answers to this question, we first need to look at the two major challenges of operating in a virtual classroom.

1. **Participants are prone to distraction**
   Unfortunately, the virtual classroom places the learner in one of the most distracting places on earth—in front of their computer. As a facilitator, you are therefore having to compete for the learner’s attention with emails, social media alerts, news updates and much more. The need for relevant, interactive content is greater than ever.

2. **Engagement levels are less visible**
   When you are leading an in-person workshop, it is easy to tell how engaging the learning experience is. Energetic nodding and note-taking suggest your points are hitting home. Glazed expressions warn you that you’re losing the room. Without these nonverbal cues to draw on, the virtual facilitator must be prepared to think and act differently, employing new techniques and technology to keep constant track of learner engagement.
What not to do

The biggest mistake organizations make when shifting to virtual learning is to reuse existing materials and formats rather than designing them anew. The fact is that the challenges and opportunities of the virtual world are very different from those of face-to-face interactions. What works in one environment is unlikely to be successful in the other.

Typical issues we see when organizations use materials that have not been designed for the virtual environment include:

• Information-sharing with no real application or behavior change.

• Passive learner experience.

• No practice opportunities.

• Low to no engagement.

• Participants using time to catch up on email, news, social media.

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How to drive engagement, accountability and action in virtual learning

One of the secrets to creating effective virtual learning experiences is building virtual accountability. This isn’t simply about engaging learners. It’s about holding them accountable to you and to the rest of the group throughout the learning session.

At Korn Ferry, we design virtual classroom and coaching experiences using a three-part Virtual Accountability Model:

• **Verbal accountability**
  Today, many virtual communication platforms enable you to divide people up into break-out groups, where individuals can discuss and share ideas on different topics. Use these features to increase the verbal accountability of participants and maintain high levels of engagement. You should also give learners permission to speak up if they need help or further explanation, as they would in a live setting.

• **Visual accountability**
  The virtual environment has a wide range of visual possibilities. Varying layouts, and using rich content such as videos, diagrams and charts, can help you increase visual accountability.

• **Kinesthetic accountability**
  Passivity is a real problem when it comes to effective virtual learning. You should aim to create as many opportunities for interaction as possible. Chat, call-out and polling functionality can all help you to increase kinesthetic accountability.
By designing virtual learning experiences around these three accountabilities, and ensuring each area is activated at least once per minute, you can achieve high levels of engagement and drive genuine behavior change.

Quick tips for effective engagement

• Keep classroom sizes about the same as you would in a live experience.

• Ask learners not to mute their lines (unless they are in an excessively noisy environment). People are prone to forget so remind them often.

• Use platform functionality to facilitate communication and engagement.

• Encourage people to speak up and ask for help whenever they want.
3 ways to maximize coaching conversations virtually

Virtual coaching can take place on the phone or online, using a remote conferencing tool. The following three approaches will help to ensure the experience is as impactful as it would be face to face—or potentially more so.

1. **Establish a safe space**
   Doctors, lawyers, therapists and others have had to find ways to build trust and credibility in virtual settings. The same is true of the coach. Coaches must aim to be as human and authentic as possible. This will help you build all-important intimacy levels and create a safe space for learning. They must remember, too, that many people feel more comfortable using audio only when communicating through online platforms. Turning the video off can also help reduce unconscious bias, forcing individuals to concentrate solely on the tone and content of each other’s speech.

2. **Compensate for loss of visual cues**
   When you’re coaching people over the phone or online, you do not have the same benefit of visual cues, such as facial expressions and hand gestures. This makes good listening even more important than ever. To be effective, a virtual coach must be mindful of everything the other person is saying, while also taking care to make themselves clear and understood. Asking powerful questions, such as “What’s great about your life this week?” and “What did you learn in the process?” can also help to stimulate discussion and build intimacy.

3. **Share resources**
   Being in a virtual setting opens up avenues of communication that may not be available to you in a face-to-face meeting. Make the most of the opportunity by sharing materials for use during and after the session, such as tip sheets, videos, book lists and even bespoke online materials.
Is **video or audio** only best?

It’s a question our clients often ask us when designing online learning experiences. The simple answer is that there is no hard and fast rule. Both video communication and audio-only communication have their advantages. These may vary depending on the learning format and on the preferences of participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REASONS TO USE VIDEO</th>
<th>REASONS NOT TO USE VIDEO</th>
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<tr>
<td>Useful for webinars and other forms of information sharing.</td>
<td>Less effective in virtual classrooms.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can serve a specific purpose (e.g. showing how to perform a sales pitch).</td>
<td>Can make intimacy more difficult.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Establishes the credibility of the speaker.</td>
<td>Causes stress to the facilitator.</td>
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Moving from theory to practice

In March 2020, Korn Ferry was planning to deliver a three-day residential learning session as part of a client’s high-potential leadership development program. The COVID-19 crisis meant that this face-to-face learning intervention had to be rapidly redesigned for a virtual setting.

Here’s how we applied some of the key principles of effective virtual learning in our design process:

• **Make it shorter**
  Three full days is great when you’re working together in a classroom environment—not so great when you’re sitting alone in front of a laptop. The first thing we did was to condense the learning into three action-packed half days.

• **Mix things up**
  Participants engaged in a variety of learning experiences in each half-day session, including virtual classrooms, breakout groups, and individual work.

• **Keep people engaged**
  Every few minutes, there were opportunities for learners to actively participate and interact. We also gave assignments for people to complete during the session and offline.

When moving to a virtual environment, it is vital that you work by design rather than by default.
The virtual design solution

Learning and development can be a powerful way to engage your workforce during the COVID-19 crisis. It signals to your people that you are investing in them and supporting them during this challenging period, while at the same time moving your business forward through development.

When moving to a virtual environment, it is vital that you work by design rather than by default and that you focus on building accountability among learners. This will enable you to create learning experiences virtually that are more engaging and more effective than ever.

<table>
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<th>FROM</th>
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<tr>
<td>3x full-day residential sessions</td>
<td>3x half-day virtual sessions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Long days with packed agenda</td>
<td>Shorter, targeted learning modules connected to learning journey</td>
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<tr>
<td>Table group discussions</td>
<td>Virtual breakout rooms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flip charts</td>
<td>Virtual whiteboards</td>
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<tr>
<td>Networking, relationship-building time</td>
<td>Structured group consulting and peer coaching time, with interaction embedded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel time, cost, jet lag, evening work</td>
<td>Integrate more seamlessly into work and life</td>
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ASK THE EXPERTS: Leading Through and Beyond COVID-19

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