

VIRTUAL TRAINING FOR MODERN LEARNERS

A White Paper by Cindy Huggett, CPLP

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Introduction

The vast majority of today's workforce is overworked, overstimulated, and overwhelmed. On average, people check their smartphones at least 9 times per hour, use multiple devices at least 2 times per day, and give content less than 7 seconds of attention to decide if it's worth their time. When in a working environment, modern learners get interrupted as often as every 5 minutes.¹ It's no wonder that many employees struggle with productivity and attention.

About the Modern Learner

While there's not one age group or industry or location that categorizes the "modern learner," there are several features that current 21st century employees have in common. First, they have almost unlimited information at their fingertips. With always-on mobile devices and frequent access to the internet, they consume information at an unprecedented pace. Second, they often work in non-traditional ways. Remote working is on the rise, with a four-fold increase in the US over the past 20 years² and similar upward trends showing in global locations.² That means almost a third of full-time employees do their work on-the-go, away from their desk.³ Next, they quickly shift their attention from one thing to another. According to one research study, a typical office worker is interrupted or switches tasks on average every 3.08 seconds.⁴

Despite these interesting statistics, organizations need to develop talent and provide learning opportunities. Therefore, in this always-on, always-connected environment, the question for learning professionals becomes "How do I reach modern learners to deliver needed training programs?"

Fortunately, there's a solution: Virtual Training.

“ On average, people check their smartphones at least 9 times per hour ”

1. Source: <https://blog.elucidat.com/modern-learner-profile-infographic/>
2. Source: futurehtrends.eiu.com/report-2015/profile-of-the-global-workforce-present-and-future/
3. Source: "Meet the Modern Learner" Infographic from Bersin by Deloitte <https://www.bersin.com/Practice/Detail.aspx?id=18071>
4. Source: <https://washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2015/06/01/interruptions-at-work-can-cost-you-up-to-6-hours-a-day-heres-how-to-avoid-them>

What is Virtual Training?

Since there are many definitions of virtual training, it's important to define what we mean by it. Virtual training is a facilitator-led, live online learning event. Participants are geographically dispersed and individually connected. They each have their own computer or other device, and rarely would they be in the same room as any other participant. Virtual training is synchronous, meaning that participants are connected at the same time as the facilitator. It has defined learning objectives, with the goal of achieving results and behavior change back on the job. Virtual training events use a robust online classroom platform that's specifically designed for highly-interactive live online learning. A typical virtual training event is usually 60 minutes in length and has under 20 participants. But not just any virtual training will meet the needs of modern learners. In order to be successful, modern virtual training needs to meet 5 criteria. It needs to be social, engaging, purposefully-designed, simple, and personalized.

With these challenges, how can virtual training provide value to the ever-changing complexity of modern learners' expectations? Let's break down each criterion and take an in-depth look at each solution.

Modern Learners are...	Therefore, Virtual Training must be...
Remote	Social
Distracted	Engaging
Overwhelmed	Purposefully-Designed
Overloaded	Simple
Unique	Personalized



Reduce Feeling of **REMOTENESS** With Social Interaction

A fundamental hallmark of virtual training is that learners are remote. They stay in their own workspace or other remote location when connecting to the online learning event via their computer. Unless you're using persistent webcams for every participant, - which is possible but not typical - learners will not have visible eye contact with anyone in the virtual class. This naturally creates feelings of isolation, which means they are more likely to stay both physically and emotionally detached from the session.

The way to combat these feelings of isolation is to create a social experience. Connect learners to one another as soon as possible in the session. Introduce everyone to each other. Use the chat tools to share information. Help learners find things they have in common. Encourage networking by pairing learners together for activities. Help them build relationships in smaller subgroups, either by creating team activities or using breakout features. Allow them to use collaboration tools in the virtual classroom. The more a virtual facilitator can foster relationships during an online class, the more participants will connect to one another and to the learning content.

Overcome **DISTRACTIONS** With An Engaging Experience

One of the biggest advantages of virtual training is that learners don't have to leave their workspace to attend a learning event. It's also one of the biggest challenges. Participants are easily distracted by their surroundings. The myriad of external distractions include noise, co-workers, interruptions, instant messages, and so on. Internal distractions -- things like the running internal to-do list in the mind, pressure to meet deadlines, reduced mental alertness due to lack of sleep, and so on -- also get in the way of learning. In the midst of these distractions, the virtual training event has to compete for their full and undivided attention.



“...combat isolation with a social experience...”

Overcome **DISTRACTIONS** With An Engaging Experience

Fortunately, it's possible to have an engaging virtual training event that overcomes these distractions. First, invite engagement from the moment a participant registers for the program. The program description should communicate relevance to the learner and share its benefits in easy-to-understand language. Each pre-session communication should continue to emphasize the program's relevance and importance to participants. Pre-session communication can also be used to set the participant up for a successful learning event by offering a preparation checklist. It can also be used to start the interaction by getting them involved in a pre-program discussion. For example, ask learners a question and then incorporate their responses into the virtual class.

Then, once participants log into the event, they should be welcomed by the facilitator and invited to jump right into a warm-up activity. Ideally, they will connect 5-10 minutes in advance, and there should be something on the screen for them to do.

At the official event start time, the program should begin, and participants should be asked to engage in an activity within the first few minutes. The activity could be typing in chat for introductions, or responding to a poll question, or drawing on the whiteboard. It should be an activity that draws in every single participant, and sets the tone for an interactive session.

As the event continues, participants should engage often - at least every 4 minutes - with the facilitator, other participants, and the virtual classroom tools. This frequency helps combat the surrounding distractions, and keeps participants engaged in their own learning. Virtual training classes are less about presentations and more about experience and application.

Participant Preparation Checklist.⁵

- Find a quiet space where you can focus and learn
- Set your devices to "do not disturb" mode
- Close out of email and other instant messaging programs
- Check your bandwidth, find a strong internet connection
- Use a hands-free headset so your hands are free for typing
- Test your computer connection in advance using the link provided

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5. Checklist adapted from Virtual Training Tools and Templates: An Action Guide to Live Online Learning by Cindy Huggett © ATD Press 2017 Used with Permission

Diminish “**OVERWHELM**” with Purposeful Design

As modern learners are constantly pulled in many directions, they often suffer from overwhelm. They are bombarded with information from devices, notifications, websites, email messages, and so on. Work is increasingly fast-paced with demands for more and more productivity. While everyone has a different capacity to handle the chaos of information overload, it's safe to say that most people are overstimulated and overwhelmed.

To illustrate this point, think of a typical television newscast. It used to be a reporter, sitting behind a desk, sharing stories of the day. Now, it's a plethora of sights and sounds as the screen is filled with extraneous content. A breaking news ticker streams across the bottom of the screen, and a list of upcoming stories are shared on the side. The broadcast's logo overlays the screen, and sometimes a picture-in-picture square or other moving graphic appears. Viewers are bombarded with information, and their eyes may not know where to focus. At the same time, it's also become the norm. Modern learners expect modern visuals.

Therefore, effective virtual training needs to be thoughtfully designed. The screen appearance should be interesting enough to capture attention, yet simple enough to avoid more cognitive

overload. And the program design should have a simple structure that leads to learning. Incorporating these two qualities - appearance and structure - will lead to a successful program.

Capturing attention with visuals can be accomplished through purposeful slide design. Although virtual training isn't the same as a presentation, the two share one main thing in common: slides. In both cases, there should be one idea per slide. Use photos with lean text. Avoid bulleted lists or slides with heavy text. Reference material, such as diagrams or detailed instructional text, should be provided in a takeaway handout instead of as an on-screen slide.

Next, since participants are already overloaded, the virtual training class should be structured and organized in a way that helps participants learn and remember new content. Do this by placing special emphasis on the opening and closing segments of the program. Participants are more likely to remember the first and last topics learned, so put the most important lessons in those slots. In addition, include frequent repetition throughout the program. The more participants hear, see, and practice content, the more likely they are to remember and use it back on the job.



Create a **SIMPLE** User Experience to Eliminate Overload

Most people - modern learners included - get frustrated when technology fails. They have little patience for cumbersome technology processes and will quickly opt out if it's not easy to use. They want a user-friendly online experience. If trying to enter or participate in a virtual training program only adds to their already overloaded environment, they are more likely to disconnect and disengage. For example, if they try to connect to an event, but have to complete 3 different forms and download 2 different browser plug-ins, and then create an account and have trouble with usernames and passwords, they will join the event already frustrated over the process. And then if - on top of that - they have trouble using the platform or have problems staying connected, then they will be much less likely to be an active participant in the learning event.

Therefore, successful virtual training includes 3 key elements for simplicity. First, choose an online classroom platform that has a simple, intuitive user interface and is easy to use. Second, prepare participants in advance about what to expect regarding technology. If they need to install an add-in, or use a certain type of browser, or do something unexpected in order to connect, let them know ahead of time so they aren't surprised by it. Share the "test" link provided by the virtual platform so that participants can check out and eliminate any anomalies well before the class begins. And let them know any minimum bandwidth requirements needed. The more you can prepare participants in advance, the easier they can connect to a session.

Third, make the virtual classroom experience simple for participants. Teach them how to use the tools at the beginning of each session by incorporating them into activities. Don't assume that they know or remember where to find things. Make it fun and interesting by incorporating the program topics into this overview instead of saying "let's learn the tools before we begin." For example, start the program with a provocative statement related to the content and ask participants to "agree" or "disagree" with it using the status indicators. Then ask participants to type in the chat box at least one reason why they chose their answer. This simple sequence both introduces the program content and teaches how to use two fundamental tools: status indicators and chat.

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Create a **SIMPLE** User Experience to Eliminate Overload

Also, throughout the session, provide instructions for each tool in the moment it's used. That way, everyone knows exactly where to click and what to do. For example, when a virtual facilitator asks a thought-provoking discussion question, they should indicate which response tool should be used (raise hand? type in chat? respond to a poll? something else?). They should also verbally give a quick reminder of where to find the tool (including instructions for mobile device users in case it's different from the desktop version). This brief instruction eliminates ambiguity and creates a better learner experience.

Cater to learners' **UNIQUENESS** with personalized solutions

Although all modern learners share common characteristics, it would be a mistake to lump them all together as the same. Each participant in a virtual training event will be unique. They will bring different backgrounds, different perspectives, and have different preferences for how they learn best. They may or may not intrinsically enjoy online learning. They may or may not be completely comfortable with the technology. They may or may not have experience with the program topic...and so on.

Therefore, the virtual training experience should be personalized for each participant. It starts with establishing relevance of the program content for each one and helping them see the WIIFM ("what's in it for me?"). It continues with a customized and tailored learning experience. One way to accomplish this is to build it into the design. For example, if there's a practice activity where participants focus on finding solutions to a problem, let them use their own problems instead of prescribing a sample case study problem.

Another way to address uniqueness is to allow participants to explore on their own during a virtual event. If they need to review content in more detail, or spend more time on a topic, provide the time and tools to do so. Allow time for practice and reflection, dialogue and discussion, so that participants get what they individually need out of the learning event. And create opportunities for individual application, so they can adapt the content to their own needs.



In Summary

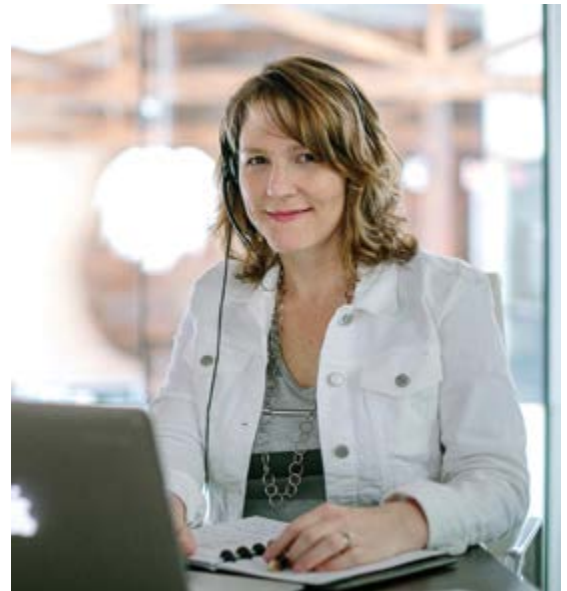
The challenges faced by today's modern workforce are not going to disappear. Instead, they will continue to increase with more information, more choices, and more distractions. Virtual training provides the solution, as long as its design engages the learner with a simple, social, and personalized experience.

About Cindy Huggett, CPLP

Cindy Huggett, CPLP is an independent consultant, professional speaker, instructional designer, classroom facilitator, and author who specializes in technology, leadership, and learning. She helps organizations and training professionals move to the virtual classroom.

Cindy is the author of three books on virtual training: [Virtual Training Tools and Templates: An Action Guide to Live Online Learning](#) (2017), [The Virtual Training Guidebook: How to Design, Deliver, and Implement Live Online Learning](#) (2013) and [Virtual Training Basics](#) (2010). Cindy is also a past member of the ATD National Board of Directors and was one of the first to earn the Certified Professional in Learning and Performance (CPLP) designation.

For more information about Cindy, visit her website: www.cindyhuggett.com.



About Jigsaw



Jigsaw provides technology for virtual training, coaching, collaboration & talent development. Jigsaw's patented technology helps companies bridge the gap between the needs of their current workforce & the increasing levels of diversity in the workforce. Jigsaw addresses key concepts that drive the modern learners; using technology for collaboration, engagement, coaching & training.

Jigsaw offers a multidimensional & activity based learning environment. It's an engaging & immersive training platform that drives success through virtual teamwork & collaboration.

Jigsaw documents all levels of performance & engagement to provide critical analytics to the organization. These analytics help confirm the effectiveness of the training programs.

Find out more by visiting www.jigsawme.com.