Can Virtual Training Be Better Than The Classroom?

Finding the Best Format for Observable Practice and Demonstrated Proficiency
Overview

When it comes to creating lasting behavior change in salespeople, the assumption is that virtual sales skills training is a pale imitation of classroom-based training. That's especially true if that virtual training is a bunch of self-paced “quiz to complete” online modules.

Can you really expect a salesperson to demonstrate proficiency in sales process, presentations or negotiations skills simply by taking a few tests in an online module? If that's what virtual sales training becomes, then it will never actually deliver on the immense promise it holds as far as making salespeople better, at scale.

But most sales leaders aren't so naïve as to believe that knowledge checks are the ticket to sales skills proficiency. As a result, they're turning their attention to virtual classroom experiences—i.e. LMS online classrooms, web conferencing or telepresence technologies—as a replacement for in-person classroom events.

But should they be turning that way? Upon further inspection, you will find limitations to the virtual classroom that exacerbate some of the existing flaws of traditional in-person classrooms.

So, if you feel the need or pressure to move to virtual learning, is there a better way?

These are some of the questions addressed in our latest State of the Conversation Report, where we explore the factors companies need to take stock of as they look to implement virtual training plans. The report also looks at which type of virtual training model might be most effective at up-skilling reps and creating behavior change, ensuring message accountability, and making sure salespeople reach proficiency in the techniques and skills they need to be successful.
Two Distinct Models for Virtual Training

The modern B2B salesperson is in a training dilemma. On one hand, they need more skills training, but they’re also facing a counter-pressure—a growing reluctance among sales managers to take reps out of the field for training.

A Corporate Visions industry survey found that:

- Nearly four out of five companies (79 percent) believe they’re not training the right number of salespeople on the skills they need each year.

- Fully 56 percent of the organizations struggling with this challenge say the top reason is pressure not to lose time out of the field.

Enter virtual training. No wonder that 65 percent of companies plan to increase investment in virtual training formats, while investment in traditional, classroom-based training is set to remain flat. But, what kind of virtual training environment is best for realizing the key training outcomes you need, such as behavior change, skills and knowledge acquisition, and reinforcement?

In a recent industry survey, more than 200 sales leaders were asked to consider two distinct approaches to virtual training, summarized at right.

So which approach are companies gravitating toward? We cover that topic on the following page.
Picking a Path for Virtual Training

When asked which approach their company is currently using, or considering using in the future as they look to incorporate virtual training, respondents were essentially split down the middle. Nearly 51 percent indicated virtual classroom, while 49 percent indicated a virtual recorded experience.

Because the virtual classroom is a version of something familiar, it tends to be seen as the most sensible alternative. In the survey, the virtual classroom was seen as superior to the virtual recorded experience in terms of impact on behavior change, coaching and feedback environment, and accountability as far as demonstrating skills learning and mastery.

But should it be?

An honest look at the so-called “gold standard” of sales learning, the in-person classroom, reveals limitations and challenges that are only compounded when you take that classroom to a virtual setting. The three major limitations are covered on the following page.
Does the Virtual Classroom Replace In-Person Training or Intensify Its Flaws?

There are big, obvious cost advantages to the virtual classroom relative to the in-person experience. But there are also three fundamental flaws of in-person classroom learning that become gaping wounds when you take the experience virtual.

Here are three examples:

1. **Time out of the field** – Ultimately, a virtual classroom still requires salespeople to carve time out of their day to participate, just like an in-person classroom. Assuming salespeople show up to the virtual classroom, instead of taking another call, there’s even less of a guarantee than with an in-person classroom that you’ll get what you need most: their sustained attention. Because the environment is virtual, there is even less accountability for being engaged during the training, and a greater chance that reps will be doing some heavy-duty multi-tasking on their day-to-day apps until they’re called on to present.

2. **Inadequate practice and coaching time** – In a classroom environment of any stripe you are always up against a clock to get in the teaching time and practice/coaching time everyone believes is necessary for creating behavior change. As you try to cram the classroom full of more people, you’ll find that some don’t get a chance to stand and deliver, or if they do, their time is compressed, along with their coaching and feedback regimen. In an online environment, it only gets worse. Reps can “hideout” or take a small role participating in quick team presentations that receive even less involved coaching.

3. **It’s event-based in nature** – Even though reps are in a classroom for upwards of two days, it’s still inescapably an event that comes and goes—just like the knowledge imparted and the coaching experienced. Still, with the in-person classroom setup, at least you had a few days of intensive focus, plus the ability to watch your peers perform and get feedback. The fleeting nature of the classroom is even more pronounced in a virtual classroom, where reps have fewer performance requirements and less peer review.
Observable Practice and Demonstrated Proficiency

The ultimate goal of sales skills training is behavior change. To that end, there’s no substitute for observable practice time and demonstrated proficiency.

The emerging virtual recorded environment is a shift away from the classroom setup and its inherent limitations toward a heavier emphasis on the practice and coaching components—both so essential to instilling behavior change.

In this respect, the potential for this model is to not only improve on virtual classrooms, but to even improve on the “holy grail” of the in-person classroom by overcoming its limitations.

HERE’S HOW IT WORKS:

1. Participate in e-learning for knowledge transfer. This includes viewing online modules containing adult learning principles to communicate critical concepts through interaction and examples.

2. Perform recorded practice “challenges”, or have reps record role plays or web conferences with prospects.

3. Have those submissions reviewed by an expert coach or consultant providing detailed scoring against a performance-based rubric, along with detailed notes on strengths and weaknesses.

4. Push short coaching videos as remediation based on the identified weaknesses.

5. Optionally require re-submission until the recording reaches a demonstrated level of proficiency.

6. Repeat that on a scheduled basis with different challenges or exercises.
The Fluency Coaching Advantage

The virtual recorded environment outlined on the previous page is a mentality shift away from certain restrictions inherent to the classroom model. Here’s where the format sets itself apart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VIRTUAL CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT</th>
<th>VIRTUAL RECORDED ENVIRONMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-approved times</td>
<td><strong>No assigned times</strong> or places reps need to be. Reps learn, practice and receive coaching when it fits their schedule, without taking them away from their day job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient practice time</td>
<td><strong>Everyone does a complete stand-and-deliver presentation</strong>, instead of doing a partial or incomplete presentation, or even getting to skip their presentation as they might in a classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak assessment structure</td>
<td><strong>Expert scoring and assessment</strong> – A coaching expert reviews the content and scores it against a rubric based on the skills taught and expectations set for demonstrated proficiency.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lacks specific tailored coaching and reinforcement</td>
<td><strong>Get detailed coaching feedback and tailored remediation</strong> – Beyond just red/yellow/green scoring, your rep gets custom, complete coaching notes identifying specific strengths and weaknesses, along with a pushed set of emails and short remediation videos for improvement in their specific areas of weakness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No ongoing certification process</td>
<td><strong>Opportunities for certification</strong> – When you really need reps to demonstrate proficiency on a skill, product, or new message, you can ask for re-submissions until certification-worthy levels are reached.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential exposure to subpar practice examples</td>
<td><strong>Watch peers’ best work</strong> – Unlike a classroom where you have to sit through some potentially bad examples, in this environment you can push the “five-star” examples for reps to review.</td>
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But the question of where virtual training goes next isn’t just about comparative advantages between different approaches. It’s also about what sales leaders actually value in a virtual training program. That’s covered on the following page.
What Matters Most in a Virtual Practice Environment?

Here’s how respondents stack-ranked the importance of six considerations germane to virtual training environments.

1. Ability of salespeople to learn and train on their own time
2. Amount of time a salesperson actually gets to practice
3. Ability to see peers’ best practice examples
4. Depth and customization of feedback
5. Ability to watch others practice and see the feedback they receive
6. Ability to grade (either pass/fail, or red/yellow/green)

Interestingly, the two areas that matter most to respondents are both areas in which respondents view the virtual recorded environment as superior to the virtual classroom.

Scheduling flexibility, practice time, and the ability to see peers’ best practice examples are the three most important considerations when it comes to a virtual training environment.
Event-based Training vs. Fluency Coaching

Time. Practice. Mastery. If you look at the three most important considerations companies are weighing as they look to implement virtual training, you begin to see a stronger case for the virtual recorded format. These top considerations, together with the perceived strengths of the recorded environment, signal a shift away from event-based training to an approach based on fluency coaching and ongoing reinforcement. Take the three most important considerations as identified by the survey. In each case, the need breaks heavily in favor of the recorded model, and here’s why:

**Ability to learn and train on your own time** – Sales leaders clearly want to liberate reps from having to train within an appointed timeframe. A virtual classroom might remove travel from the equation, but it doesn’t remove the restriction of having to honor a pre-established time. In an era where self-pacing, flexibility and individualized learning are increasingly favored, the virtual classroom environment could struggle to deliver.

**Amount of time a salesperson gets to practice** – One of the most profound factors in creating behavior changes and instilling deep skills knowledge comes from the opportunity to practice in a stand-and-deliver environment. One of the biggest limitations of traditional classroom-based formats is that not every rep gets ample opportunity to practice—and master—the story and skills they need to deliver at a high level. Unfortunately, the virtual classroom experience comes up short because it fails to sufficiently alter the traditional workshop environment, which is already squeezed from a practice time standpoint.

On the other hand, the virtual recorded environment presents limitless opportunities to practice and refine your delivery—all while receiving tailored, individualized coaching and feedback from experts on the message. In our experience, we see salespeople practicing an average of eight (8!) times before hitting the submit button. Compare that to any other training practice format.

**Ability to see peers’ best practice examples** – In a virtual classroom, you might just have the fortune of observing an outstanding peer example of how to deliver your message. But you also might not. That’s the risk of a live environment, virtual or otherwise. But, it’s a risk that a recorded virtual environment completely negates. In the latter, you’re guaranteed to have access to the most outstanding examples of your story in action.

The needs above speak to demand for coaching that **a) provides timing flexibility, b) ensures reps demonstrate proficiency and c) provides continuous reinforcement**. After all, when you really need salespeople to demonstrate proficiency on a skill, a new product, or a new message, an event that occurred three months in the past, or is set for three months in the future, won’t do them much good.
Proficiency Through Practice

As a company that delivers training across all modalities, including in-person and virtual, Corporate Visions doesn’t have any particular axe to grind. What we do have an interest in is determining the most efficient and effective training format for driving behavior change.

The importance of observable practice on behavior change can’t be overstated. This is where the virtual recorded environment comes through in a big way. With fluency-based coaching, every salesperson is accountable for their performance. When a rep’s skills are being judged by a set of expert eyes, there’s nowhere to hide. That’s why the average learner completes eight practice runs before hitting the submit button.

You also guarantee salespeople know what good looks like because they’re shown examples of criteria-based top performances. Reps don’t sit through a litany of in-person “hit or miss” attempts; they know exactly which examples represent the gold standard and what makes them great.

What’s Next

Learning leaders say they want more virtual training, but they’re signing checks more slowly than they’re expressing needs. That’s for good reason. Compliance and knowledge training is one thing, but there’s very little evidence that sales and marketing skills can be trained as effectively online as in person. That’s why Corporate Visions is partnering with a leading research professor, Dr. Nick Lee of the Warwick Business School, to test the efficacy of virtual training on skills behavior change.

With help from our clients, we plan to conduct side-by-side A/B testing in real-world scenarios to determine the effectiveness and impact on behavior change of the virtual classroom and the virtual recorded environment. It’s a question that demands the rigor of research, and we’re planning to take it on. Be on the lookout in the quarters ahead for those results.
Conclusion

Online, recorded fluency training may seem like a radical departure from the in-person, event-based classroom model that’s been the de facto standard of the training world for decades. But it’s actually a doubling down on what sales training has always been about: fluency, command and ownership of the message.

No doubt a live a virtual environment has its merits—just as a live classroom-based event does. But a big reason you’re making the switch to virtual training is to minimize the native flaws of classroom-based learning. But, based on what sales leaders want most from that transition to virtual, it looks like the virtual classroom might fall short of that promise. Worse, it could even exacerbate some limitations of traditional classroom-based training that companies are most eager to transcend.

Rethinking The Pace of Learning

The strength of classroom-based events, online or in-person, is that they create a fast-paced, immersive learning experience, powered by energy, engagement and rapport between talented consultants and sales reps. Their weakness is that this high-octane environment is confined to a relatively short interval of time. When behavior change and skills acquisition are at stake, that weakness can’t be overlooked. Because events—no matter how outstanding in the moment—carry an inherent risk of diminishing returns. The impact of a life-changing training experience might be powerfully felt in the immediate aftermath of the event. But how much does that positive impact degrade over time?

A fluency coaching model reimagines the traditional training cycle of high-intensity, time-crunched learning followed by gradual skills erosion. The approach instead uses spaced learning, which unfolds in stages over multiple weeks, designed to enable reps to gradually acquire and retain critical skills. Best of all, this model doesn’t interfere with their day-to-day workflow. Following this approach, reps acquire knowledge then demonstrate that knowledge by submitting recorded video and written challenges that receive individual coaching. By altering the breakneck pace of classroom learning, reps can benefit from an environment that’s more flexible, thorough, and sustained.
About Corporate Visions

Corporate Visions is a leading marketing and sales messaging, content, and skills training company. Global B2B companies come to us when they want to:

- **Create Value** – Break the status quo and differentiate your solutions from competitors
- **Elevate Value** – Build a more effective business case to justify executive decisions
- **Capture Value** – Maximize the profitability of each deal and customer lifetime value

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