BALANCING BLENDED LEARNING

How to Make the Most of Instructor-Led Training (ILT) Combined with Virtual Training (VT)

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INTRODUCTION

There are a multitude of training options to source in the business world today. Technology has made them available with the click of the button. A quick web search reveals training options such as; online training, social learning, on-the-job training, interactive training, simulation, mentoring, and more. The business owner or training manager searching for an optimal training program, on the other hand, need only search for two methods: **Instructor-Led Training (ILT)** and **Virtual Training (VT).** All methods of training are encompassed under the umbrellas of ILT and VT. The search is streamlined by knowing this, and the necessary administrative and developmental decisions are made easier.

Considering the long-term health and success of any company, incorporating an efficient and effective training program is undeniably beneficial. Investing in employee training, in part, affords compliance management and clean audit records while eliminating potential headaches and disruptions in productivity. By ensuring employee safety, boosting team morale, and instilling clear and ongoing expectations and consistent procedural processes, the desire for a robust Return on Investment (ROI) becomes a reality.

Further, blended learning, combining both ILT and VT, can enhance a training program. Understanding how a **Learning Management System (LMS)** will boost a blended learning program is essential as well. By gathering and sharing knowledge- and skill-based experience from internal and external Subject Matter Experts (SMEs), VT and ILT will be explained, and the effectiveness of a blended learning program clarified.

WHAT IS INSTRUCTOR-LED TRAINING (ILT)?

Instructor-led training is a teaching delivery format offering job-related skills and knowledge from an instructor to a student or group of students. ILT can be utilized either in a classroom setting or online (virtual ILT, or VILT) dedicated to real-time interaction between instructors/facilitators and learners. ILT is the longest-standing and most traditional form of training.

WHAT IS VIRTUAL TRAINING (VT)?

Virtual training is a teaching delivery platform in which knowledge and skills are delivered by way of technology using a computer or smart device. VT is often referred to as e-learning and sometimes mobile or distance learning. VT can be administered in a group setting, but the education itself will be accomplished on an individual basis using individual computers or smart devices.

THE PROS AND CONS OF ILT AND VT

Some training topics will be more positively impacted by having an instructor deliver a mass assignment face-to-face. On occasion, having all necessary employees present at one time mitigates labor loss and ensures procedural consistency. For example, this would be the case for a construction company that needs to show essential audit trails and compliance records for a critical new safety procedure.

In contrast, Fred Shaffer, Manager of Staff Training and Development with the Houston Zoo, mentions, *"In the past, most of the training was lecture and sitting in a large auditorium. It wasn't real training and most gained little from it."* Having flexibility in the options of his training platforms worked best for his business.

Effectively communicating the benefits of a blended learning system to a company's leadership team is only one of the necessary hurdles to overcome. They will also need to understand the process of implementation as well as how a blended ILT/VT learning program will enhance their overall ROI. A full grasp of the pros and cons of each learning system is crucial to onboarding a successful training program.

INSTRUCTOR-LED TRAINING

Pros

- In-person learning
- Person-to-person feedback
- Cost-effectiveness for smaller numbers
- Real-time accountability
- Timely curriculum edits

Cons

- Ongoing cost for facilities and instructors
- Reduced work hours
- Inconsistent curriculum presentation
- Inconsistent training information
- Low retention rates
- Not suited for every learning style

A full grasp of the pros and cons of each learning system is crucial to onboarding a successful training program.

Virtual Training

Pros

- Reduced learning time
- Global access
- User-friendly interface
- Cost-effectiveness for larger numbers
- Cost-effectiveness for small companies
- Overall flexibility
- Immediate feedback
- Higher retention rates
- Procedural consistency and standardization
- Low-to-no environmental impact
- Ongoing customization
- Modernized employee engagement/interaction
- Risk-free environment
- Easy access to employee training records
- Compliance management
- Up-to-date audit records
- Caters to multiple learning styles

Cons

- Integration hurdles
- Technological learning curve
- Cost-effectiveness for small number of learners
- Not suited for every learning style
- Implementation challenges
- Ongoing budget impact

HOW DO ILT AND VT COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER?

With instructor-led training being the most common delivery platform for employee training, it is understandable that businesses would potentially be cautious in switching to a more technology-driven method like VT. The learning curve, the initial setup, as well as convincing the administrative and management teams of the benefits, may seem daunting. However, for businesses strictly using ILT who are considering enhancing their program, Gwen Follett, VP Product Development & Support at OSI, reports that *"They can easily add VT into the mix and optimize their training program."*

While instructor-led training is alive and well, blending it with VT is proving to be the way of the future. All things considered, *"All businesses can benefit from blended learning, especially those whose training requires hands-on or in-person training,"* says OSI's Multimedia Services Manager, Tina Hoskins. Hoskins further explains that "*a blended learning program can be developed by starting with the existing learning program and analyzing the types of learning needed, such as knowledge and skills. After determining the types of learning needed, the training can be split into ILT and VT that complement the topic."*

A blended approach of VT and ILT is vital to a successful training program. Some topics are more conducive to a flexible training location and the ability to be learned on a computer or smart device. Additionally, the convenience of "just-in-time" VT is key to providing compliance training for a job without sacrificing money-making working hours waiting for an ILT class to be scheduled and subsequently attended. With VT, most scheduling conflicts are avoided altogether, as students can take the courses individually as their schedule permits.

Conversely, with some training topics, ILT is a must to achieve not only compliance with some regulations but also an optimal learning experience with maximum knowledge retention. Some topics better lend themselves to a class setting with the ability to ask the instructor questions and participate in group activities.

ILT is critical for any business that requires an in-person training scenario; for example, classroom activities/practices, instructor Q&A time, and individual performance evaluations to certify specific skills. Yet, they can still use individual VT for the knowledge element or for soft skills, such as HR topics.

"Much of today's training can be accomplished via VT, saving time and money. However, some training is better suited for face-to-face, such as demonstrations, simulations, and practical discussions. A blended training program is the 'best of both worlds' scenario," says OSI's Customer Service Team Lead and Trainer, Karen Hubbard. Karen further illustrates her point by saying, *"Administrators can utilize a blended approach on a single subject. For example, have an ILT group discussion about a topic, then have users take an online test on the topic to show they have absorbed the material. They can even use our VT courses in a group setting (ILT) then have users take the test online (VT)."*

There are two key factors to recognize, which will further explain how ILT and VT complement one another.

NEEDS OF THE LEARNER

One key factor in deciding which training approach works best for a company is to determine the needs of the learner. Consideration must be given to assess the staff's learning styles, preferences, motivations, as well as assess their availability. Different people learn in different ways and are motivated by various techniques. Blended learning offers a variety of styles and techniques and affords opportunities for students to complete topical training by VT and another portion by ILT. This combined training method engages learners by way of having the ability to ask clarifying questions or receive hands-on skills training during the monitored ILT portion and work through the knowledge portion at their convenience by VT. It is the best of both worlds, as indicated in an interview with Houston Zoo's training expert, Fred Shaffer. Shaffer asserts, *"Here at the Houston Zoo we have 450 Employees working 24/7. It has been critical to adapt to their schedules and fit what they needed."*

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NEEDS OF THE COMPANY

Another critical key factor in deciding which training method to implement is determining the needs of the company—of which the learning styles of employees is paramount. A blended learning program that works for your employees is effectively one that works for your team. Significant time in research, planning, and preparation among upper management, administration, and the teaching team are required before implementation.

Entering into a decision with uninformed haste will prove chaotic at best and disastrous at worst. It is imperative to discern what works for the budget, for the employees, and what will be most efficient for the day-to-day business needs.

A positive return on the investment determines the bottom line for growth in a company. Ultimately, the investment established in all areas of training should not only support the ROI but strengthen it.

"It really is a journey together."
— Fred Shaffer

HOW TO BALANCE BLENDED LEARNING

Integrating tradition and technology and implementing a balanced blended learning program will require the leadership team's full buy-in from the start. All parties involved will need to understand and commit to the plan for the advantages of a successful training program to be realized. Houston Zoo's, Fred Shaffer, strongly recommends getting all levels on board from the beginning and states that *"It really is a journey together."*

IDENTIFY TRAINING REQUIREMENTS

Training requirements are unique to each company. As a company begins the process of implementing a balanced blended learning program, significant time and resources will be required in the planning stage. The first requirement is to identify how much training is needed and what training will be necessary for any given skill set. With all training requirements identified, the next steps can be taken to segregate the needs for ILT and VT.

SEGREGATE NEEDS FOR ILT AND VT

Companies need to establish which training should be carried out via ILT or VT. Balancing ILT and VT is based on the types of learning required, such as knowledge and skills. Some topics may need only ILT or VT, while some may need more of one than the other. "*Some studies suggest a 70 VT | 30 ILT ratio,"* says Hubbard.

This process requires unearthing and examining old habits. Some people are simply more comfortable with one style over another. Getting them to incorporate a mixture can sometimes be a challenge. Coming together on the issues of organizational structure, roles, curriculum assignment, course code nomenclature, ILT class locations, and equipment takes much thought. The effort, however, will provide clarity and direction in creating a rewarding blended-learning balance.

Lessening the amount of traditional ILT frees up instructors, which are usually employees who have been taken from their jobs. *"I suggest trying to incorporate as much VT as possible due to its time-saving characteristics and ease of delivery – online, anywhere, anytime. This will ultimately save money,"* says Follett of OSI. With ILT needs allocated, the remaining training can typically be carried out via individual VT.

DETERMINE TRAINING DEVELOPMENT

Potential roadblocks and pitfalls that could impede success should be honestly and carefully examined. Getting advice on best practices for setting up your organizational structure, as well as on assigning curriculum, should not be overlooked. These are two areas that, when carried out efficiently, can save a lot of time and energy while implementing, maintaining, and documenting your program.

Companies may already have training in place as existing ILTs. Some current training courses can be converted to more effective and efficient VT. PowerPoint presentations that are currently used in an ILT setting can be quickly uploaded and offered as VT. They also can be paired with a content provider's custom-created and off-the-shelf library courses.

Determining what portions of your training can be implemented with in-house experts and what training will require external help is crucial. When looking to outsource online training needs in an LMS, fundamental factors to consider are:

- Do they offer tools to enroll, execute, and track classroom training?
- Is their customer service U.S.-based?
- Do they have comprehensive reporting capabilities?
- Is their software user-friendly?
- Are the costs competitive and concise?
- Do they offer flexibility in assigning curriculum: roles, jobs, tracks, etc.?
- Do they provide a variety of ways to deliver content, for example, SCORM, AICC, download, etc.?

"Once the initial setup is complete and best practices are in place, time will be saved in a multitude of ways, including group assignments, inherited assignments, automatic email reminders, and enrollment notifications, etc.," says Follett.

IMPLEMENT BLENDED LEARNING

Once the background work has been completed, it is time to execute the blended learning program. Implementing a successful software application to track, evaluate, and adapt as business needs change is vital for future growth. However, finding an LMS that provides the ability to track classrooms, instructors, and classes along with VT capabilities is crucial.

"Optimizing the LMS's functional relevance for ILT needs was a challenge. We wanted the LMS to ease the burdens of ILT, including scheduling, enrolling, and tracking, yet we also wanted to keep it simple and user friendly. To accomplish this, we built and released an ILT tool in our LMS called Class Manager. We began getting ideas from our clients that were using Class Manager extensively for their classroom training, and their feedback provided valuable input to assist us with enhancing the Class Manager feature to the helpful tool it is today." Gwen Follett, OSI.

WHY USING AN LMS CAN ENHANCE YOUR BLENDED TRAINING PROGRAM

While it is clear that a VT program is easily carried out with the use of an LMS, what many training management teams don't realize is that some LMSs can track instructor-led training as well. A single training management tool is vital in balancing both types of training.

"The most common misconception is that ILT cannot be tracked effectively in an LMS. I have encountered many companies that still store files and files of paper sign-in rosters to prove compliance. If an audit arises, they must search through stacks of paperwork to account for employee training. If they utilized an LMS that managed both VT and ILT, proving compliance for audits would be much simpler and efficient using the LMS's reporting features." says Follett.

Karen Hubbard of OSI expounds further on this, *"Admins simply are not aware that an LMS can be used to track any event (ILT, certifications, safety briefings). They utilize multiple spreadsheets when it can all be tracked within one LMS."*

When asked what she finds to be the biggest obstacles companies face with blended learning, Follett states, *"In my opinion, the biggest obstacle is data tracking and data reporting. Ensuring employees have completed training and are in compliance can be difficult if not organized properly. This is where the use of an LMS that tracks both VT and ILT is so important. The ability to store both types of records electronically, thereby simplifying report generation, is a huge time saver and money saver."*

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"The most common misconception is that ILT cannot be tracked effectively in an LMS. " — Gwen Follett

CONCLUSION

Recognizing that a blended learning program requires a shift in focus from a lecture-driven platform to a student-centric program is fundamental. A healthy training system does not eliminate the need for teachers, nor does it dictate computers are the best option.

"Real training takes Tell, Show, Do, Review. If they aren't doing this, they aren't getting trained. True blended learning includes all." Fred Shaffer, Houston Zoo

Recognizing the benefits of using both VT and ILT and utilizing a blended learning program will enable tradition and technology to work in tandem; forging a favorable path to the future. Implement the productive assets of an LMS to the program, and success is imminent.

In 1999, OSI – OverNite Software, Inc., launched its robust web-based LMS that provides, delivers, and tracks online training to organizations around the world. OSI is a leader in the field of online learning, offering U.S.-based customer service and support. Let OSI help with your blended learning administration and documentation requirements. Call us at (979) 849-2002 or toll-free at 888.228.2473.

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