The learners log on to your organization’s online meeting platform in sweatpants. A few of them turn their videos on, but most keep them off. (After all, with 50 training participants, who’s going to notice?) Even the learners who keep their videos on are multitasking; the instructor can tell because sometimes they smile when the instructor hasn’t made a joke, and their eyes are scanning a screen that doesn’t have much text on it. The instructor hears typing from one learner who forgot to mute himself and a dog barking from another’s home office. Meanwhile, she’s fielding multiple chat messages from learners who are having trouble hearing her, and she’s seen a few learners log off the meeting completely.

Sound familiar? While these challenges are certainly nothing new, they’ve been ramped up in a year when many employees are working from home and dealing with constant virtual meetings and training sessions. Zoom fatigue is a real phenomenon, and when learners are already exhausted from being virtually on what feels like 24/7, they have no patience for training that’s unengaging or platforms that don’t work.

Still, your employees need to learn, now more than ever. With the pandemic still in full force, they’re not returning to the office soon — so, what’s a learning leader to do? Let’s take a look at four common challenges in remote learning and what overcoming them might look like.
1 | Interactivity and Engagement

In an in-person classroom, it’s much easier for learners to stay engaged — they have nowhere else to go and nothing else to do, and the presence of an engaging instructor keeps things interactive and interesting. In a virtual classroom, however, it’s all too easy for even the best instructors to lose even the most typically engaged learners’ interest and attention. It’s difficult to stay engaged when you’re looking at the same thing — the same person’s face or a static slide deck — for very long, especially when you’ve been staring at a computer all day. With most platforms, however, instructors are limited to this type of one-sided, single-modality presentation.

A better remote learning experience better approximates in-person learning. The more an instructor can make learners feel like they are participating in an experience that’s as true to “real life” as possible, the more engaged those learners will be. This level of interaction means seeing a true presentation, with movement, gestures and facial expressions rather than just slides. It means seeing multiple people interacting with each other in a seamless way. It means using multiple formats and modalities to deliver information, from slide decks to learner collaboration and panel discussions. And, ultimately, it means having learners who are not just there to check a box but are truly invested in the outcome of the training.

With this type of training, an audio/video recording of the session for learners who were unable to attend due to time differences or other demands on their schedule is a more engaging experience. A recording of an interactive, multidimensional training is going to spark more interest and learning for viewers than a static recording of a meeting.

2 | Attention and Accountability

Even assuming that an entire classroom of learners has the best of intentions, there are bound to be distractions that impede their learning. Ironically, working at home, isolated from one’s colleagues, can often mean more distractions than the workplace. Not all employees have dedicated home offices; many are working with a spouse or roommate and pets or children to care for. Over the course of 2020, as a workforce, we’ve become so accustomed to multitasking that it’s almost become acceptable — we turn off our video; start working on something else; and tell ourselves, “I’ll just get the information from the presenter afterward, anyway!”

In a small team meeting, it’s easier to stay focused and to keep team members accountable for doing the same. But in a training session, when one learner is one of 25 or 40 heads on a screen, it’s
easy to assume that no one is paying attention — because, probably, no one is. Learners can mute themselves, they can chat off screen, they can check their emails or their phones — there's a million ways to be distracted and few ways to be held accountable.

A better remote learning experience includes multiple ways to keep learners’ attention and keep them accountable for participation. In this type of virtual classroom, learners feel like they're participating, not viewing. They see people they know on screen, they answer questions from the instructor and they take a more active role in their learning. The instructor relies on more than a slide deck, using flipcharts, poll questions, breakout rooms and other tools to keep things interesting. Learners, knowing they may be called upon to answer a question or share an idea, pay attention to what's happening on screen rather than picking up their phone and browsing their social media feeds.

It's incumbent upon instructors to understand the platform their organization uses and know how to use it to hold learners’ attention, notice who is becoming disengaged and redirect their attention back to the learning experience. They must begin to think of remote learning not as a didactic presentation but as a dialogue and discussion, where learners can raise their hands and talk to each other not through an asynchronous chat but through their video and through tools such as polls.

With better technology, instructors also have the ability to pivot based on learner responses. In the in-person classroom, instructors can see confusion on learners' faces or identify when they're losing their attention. Traditionally, remote learning makes it difficult or impossible to do so — which is why
it's important to have the right platform and teach instructors how to measure engagement and learning in the moment (and after the training is over) and then adjust and adapt accordingly.

3 | Technical Problems

In the classroom, if the instructor uses technology, there is often someone on hand to help if it goes wrong — and the opportunities for tech to go wrong are minimized due to the fact that it’s only the instructor, not the learners, who is using any form of technology. In the virtual classroom, the success of a training program depends on the computer, software and WiFi connection of not only the instructor but every learner, too. Instructors will lose learners quickly if the learners can't see them or hear them. Plus, the varying bandwidth capacity of each learner’s home plays a role in not only their learning but in their fellow participants’ learning, as well — one bad connection can impede interaction and cause immense frustration. The more a learner has to do to accommodate tech problems, the less engaged he or she will be.

In a better remote learning experience, the instructor and the learners aren’t worried about technology, because they don’t have to. They can focus on the content rather than why they can’t hear it. There is less software to download; rather, learners simply click on a URL and enter the classroom. And, most importantly, there is a tech support team in the virtual classroom, monitoring everyone’s experience and seamlessly stepping in to fix any bugs that come up. When the sound goes out on the instructor, he or she doesn’t have to stop to figure out why — the support team notices the problem and fixes it.

4 | Reporting and Measurement

We know that evaluating the impact of training is a common challenge, regardless of the learning modality used. For an eLearning program, it’s easy to track things like views, clicks and assessment scores to understand engagement levels and learning outcomes. For a traditional live virtual training program, however, it can be difficult to know who is paying attention, let alone who is learning.

A better remote learning experience delivers engagement information for each participant, giving training professionals the ability to identify learners who might need additional coaching and to pinpoint areas of their content that might need improvement. Metrics such as number of interactions with the facilitator or other learners, responsiveness to polls and surveys, and punctuality and attention are all valuable pieces of information that many platforms now track. Some can even tell training professionals whether participants had other windows open on their browser to help gauge engagement and keep everyone accountable — from the learners to the instructor to the design team.
A Final Note: Selecting a Platform

Does this virtual classroom sound like a pipe dream? It’s not. Technological advances are making the remote learning experience more and more like the in-person experience. With the right platform, you can make it happen.

In your search for a solution, take a comprehensive look at what you’re trying to accomplish and what success will look like. Then, ask vendors the right questions. For example, many providers are trying to improve video quality, but they don’t offer the capability for training participants to speak with each other “face to face.” Ask yourself, “What does a great training session with engaged participants look like at my organization? What questions do I need to have answered to make sure our learning experience is what I’m envisioning?”

More and more, learners are looking to have an experience — not just to be talked to. They want connection and community, not the ability to turn off video and half-listen to a presentation. When they feel like they’re part of an experience, when they start recognizing people as they’re being called on and can see their facial expressions and gestures, when they can interact with the instructor and their classmates, they feel like they’re part of something big. And, in a remote workplace and a changing and stressful time, being part of something is just what they need.

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About Pando

PANDO integrates a full studio production with a 40’ video wall that displays remote learners. The wall is the instructors’ palette, enabling them to interact face to face, in real time, with all learners. Execution of the event is flawless, as the studio crew manages the show flow and audio, video and other content. Built-in interactive features all add up to an incredible, immersive and engaging experience. Plus, in-house project management and production teams assist with all pre-production elements, eliminating many of the challenges of traditional virtual training, such as technology issues, distracted learners and lack of engagement.

On the back end, our post-training reporting data is unlike anything in the industry. The PANDO Index of Engagement (PIE score) includes the following metrics for each learner: punctuality, active participation and proactivity, responsiveness, and distraction. To date, clients have historically realized a return on investment (ROI) ranging from 3:1 to 13:1. As this data suggests, PANDO is not only an incredible training tool but a cost-effective, time-saving platform as well. Learn more at www.pandomeetings.com.