



Training without frontiers™

Is the virtual training room
virtually here?

In this article Barry Hazelwood – Skill4 International's Business Director, Operations – discusses the prospect of the first 'virtual training room' for real skills development. In it he points out lessons that have already been learned from pilot studies. It is written primarily for a non-IT technical audience.

Over the years, the Huthwaite International group has carefully monitored the impact of technology on the delivery of skills training. The arrival of each innovation has followed the same pattern:

- Extravagant claims that the new e-something will sweep away traditional training delivery methods in a matter of months
- An avalanche of competing attempts to fulfil those claims, all of which fail
- A gradual coalescence around some shared characteristics leading to the emergence of some industry standards
- A balance being struck between everything the technology might be *capable of* and what features within that capability are actually *useful*
- The integration of the final result with training room activities to complement them.

We ourselves have followed the same path. In recent years we have developed a range of technology-enabled solutions such as SPIN[®] Online, the SMART data collection and management system and MSP, our electronic account strategy toolbox. Each is blended with what goes on in the training room to reinforce or improve the outcomes generated.

In other words, there is no doubt that technology has enhanced traditional skills training, but clearly it has failed to supplant it entirely – yet!

This is principally because it's been unable to replicate the interactivity between participants themselves and participants and trainer that is

necessary for behavioural skills development. Up until now, technology has been able to improve knowledge and even influence attitudes, but it has failed to provide the effective platform for practice and feedback that leads to a change in behaviour.

However we at Huthwaite International group believe that the time is approaching when it might be practically possible and we plan to be in the forefront of the 'Virtual Training Room' (VTR). Before we go any further, it might help to define what it is and what it's not.

The Virtual Training Room is not self-managed learning where learners plan their own study and complete it individually allowing the technology to steer them through at their own pace. This approach may form part of the blended solution, typically at the front end to convey its knowledge elements, but it is not the VTR.

Nor is it a webinar or webcast, which usually involves a sizable audience listening to a subject matter expert presenting the content supported by visual aids. These events are largely passive with interactivity being restricted to a Q&A session.

The true Virtual Training Room will replicate as far as possible all the elements of its traditional 'actual' predecessor:

- A trainer who can interact with his or her audience simultaneously, or in groups or with individuals in order to manage the whole learning process
- The ability to put together groups of participants to undertake joint tasks, such as roleplays or simulations that replicate their real world
- The opportunity for the trainer to monitor the progress of those tasks and intervene, coach and help participants – individually or in their group – to review them.

The only real difference is that in the VTR the trainer and participants do not come together in the same physical location. The various parties can each be anywhere: any office, any country and even

any time zone, within practical limits. This eliminates some of the major costs involved in an actual event, like travel, accommodation and local logistics.

However, there is a common misconception that applies to all new technology like the VTR – that it will inevitably make any activity cheaper, quicker and less reliant on skilled resources.

At Skill4 International we have already undertaken some research into current practice and we have conducted a pilot implementation of our own. From this, we have identified a number of key requirements for making the VTR world a suitable platform for skills training.

Keep the 'actual' option

We do believe that, whilst the Virtual Training Room may take up significantly more space in a solution, in the short term it is likely to remain an element within a blend of the virtual and the actual. The reason for this is the limiting factor of bandwidth, which cannot yet reliably provide fully interactive video communication over the Internet.

Until such time as full video is available, the actual training room will still have a role.

Even then, we doubt if it will die out entirely. After all, we are human beings. The primary reason why organisations bring their people together in a training room might be for learning, but the process does fulfil other purposes of a social and motivational nature.

Manageable numbers

A typical participant:trainer ratio in an actual training room will be 12:1. It's a tempting thought that the VTR will allow a higher ratio, but our experience suggests that the reverse is true.

An effective VTR requires a far higher level of direction and control on the part of the trainer. The absence of physical clues on both sides can allow interaction levels to decline and individual

participants to disengage. We've watched modules that start with 20 people end up with only three or four taking an active part or even still present.

Ideally there should be a maximum of 8 participants and one trainer supported by a 'producer' who manages the underlying process. This person acts 'behind the scenes', organising upcoming activities, monitoring individual participation levels, feeding that data back to the trainer so that engagement levels can be directly managed. If trainers and producers are interchangeable this adds to the event by providing some variety to the session delivery.

The VTR does provide us with an opportunity to reduce dramatically the participant:trainer ratio at key learning points in the event at minimal cost. For example, whilst participants undertake a paired roleplay, additional expert observers can be brought in to analyse and provide feedback on an individual basis. The cost of physically drafting this additional resource into an actual event would be prohibitive, but the VTR allows them to discharge this short-term role without leaving their desks.

Trainer skills

Running a good Virtual Training Room makes significantly tougher demands on the skills of the trainer, even with a producer working effectively in the background. Trainers who traditionally rely on gesture, facial expression or physical mobility to bring variety and emphasis to their sessions will have to learn equivalent paralinguistic tricks. Voice modulation, tone and pitch will be the new tools of their trade.

Questioning skills are critical. For example, in the actual training room the trainer can throw out a question addressed to the group in general and receive immediate non-verbal feedback as to whether the question has been heard and understood. He or she can then sweep the room and use eye contact to identify an expected respondent to it. Further instant physical clues show whether others in the group understand and agree or disagree with the answer.

None of this instant feedback is available to the VTR trainer. There are mechanisms, such as a 'thumbs-up' icon from each participant, but they require active prompting from the trainer or producer. In time everyone will become more adept at using them; in the short term, it's another challenge for the VTR trainer.

The VTR trainer needs to address questions to named individuals and make each choice of individual in the light of data from the producer on participation levels. Otherwise contributions become restricted to a few dominant participants with the rest disengaging and for all we know going off to do other things. Alternatively, undirected questions result in a game of 'chicken' with long embarrassing silences ending in the trainer losing nerve and answering his or her own question.

The whole VTR event requires far greater structure and choreography from the trainer. To enable the producer to set up tasks and activities, sessions must follow a strict timetable.

Because of their sedentary nature, VTR events can really only run for a few hours at a time and therefore participants will have other diary commitments around it. Over-running is not an option. Frequent breaks are necessary and the 'downtime' that inevitably follows needs to be minimised. All experienced trainers develop 'sheepdog' skills to shepherd a group physically back into the training room after a break. In the virtual world, this is not possible.

All this structure is not just the responsibility of the trainer; the participants must match it. This comes down to the level of rigour that the learning organisation is willing to apply. The Virtual Training Room provides limitless opportunity for indiscipline and truancy.

Conclusion?

We are excited about the Virtual Training Room. It offers the opportunity for skills development in a manner that is convenient to both receiver and provider. If organisations approach it with proper expectations and rigour, it can deliver major cost savings in travel and accommodation, and that's before the environmental benefits.

The aspect that excites us most however is that the VTR will stand or fall *not* as a result of technological excellence. It is trainer delivery excellence – a core competence of ours, in over 40 countries and more than 30 languages – that will determine whether the Virtual Training Room actually delivers or virtually delivers.



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