

HOW TO...

DESIGN TRAINING TO INCLUDE VIRTUAL (OR REMOTE) DELEGATES

Most development courses are delivered in person or on-line. It's rarely a mixture of both. Of course, having an on-line element followed by a live element (and maybe followed by another on-line element) is not usual. But having a workshop that includes delegates in the room and delegates joining virtually presents its own challenges.

To manage a group like this, the trainer needs to be experienced and agile – and a good knowledge of how to use the technology is always an advantage! However, as designers, we need to help the trainer out by not relying too much on 'in the room' exercises. Neither do we want it to be 'chalk and talk'. It's a challenge to keep a session interactive whilst some people are sitting possibly hundreds of miles away and even in a different time zone!

There are a number of key things to bear in mind. Here are some of them, along with my tips for creating learning experiences that can accommodate virtual (remote) attendees.

1. **Keep it short** – No matter how engaging or important your session, it is harder for people joining remotely to stay focused for a long time. If you know that your sessions are likely to include remote attendees, break your session down into bite-size chunks: About 3 hours is the maximum length, with 90 minutes – 2 hours being ideal.
2. **Maximise pre-course work** – This puts everyone on an even footing and helps to reduce the time needed in the session. It also encourages everyone to contribute equally as they are all starting from the same place.
3. **Include an Ice-breaker** – Even if it is short and even if people know each other, and especially if people are joining in via audio only. The trainer (and other delegates) need to know what remote attendees sound like, and it makes them feel included from the start.
4. **Replicate where possible** – Prepare your remote attendees by making sure that they have access to the same materials as those in the room. For example, they can still join in with post-it note, picture card or drawing exercises if they have the right resources – it doesn't have to all be verbal.
5. **Include individual exercises** – Solo exercises are likely to form part of any workshop, but if you know there are going to be virtual attendees, you may wish to include more. Using quizzes and puzzles, which are then discussed means everyone gets the same experience.
6. **Give thought to exercises** – Include a good mix of exercises, and vary the pace/feedback method. Make sure that remote delegates can participate – even if its in a slightly different way. Case studies, discussions and individual contributions all work well. You may also find it useful to break exercises into parts: For example, instead of asking everyone to think of the benefits of X in a general sense, it can be more useful to focus thoughts and ask different people to consider different things.

7. **Build in breaks** – Given that it is harder to concentrate when attending remotely, you need to build in short breaks frequently. You may have three 10 minute breaks in a 3 hours session rather than one of 20 minutes. Be mindful that virtual attendees are far more likely to be interrupted, especially if they are in a satellite office rather than at home.
8. **Create robust materials and send them in advance** – Your remote delegates won't be able to see your flipcharts and post-it notes, and (depending on your set up) even viewing slides that you present may be difficult. To help keep everyone together, use detailed materials (a workbook is ideal) and give instructions when certain pages/exercises should be referred to. You can send a slide show if you like, though the trainer will have to remember to signpost when they are moving on.
9. **Instructions need to be super-clear** – A good session plan gives clear instructions, but trainers are more likely to be able to adapt and flex depending on the reaction in the room. When including remote delegates there's less opportunity for flexibility, so be clear about how to set up and debrief exercises.
10. **Time for debrief** – As the trainer is more likely to ask for individual feedback after exercises, this needs to be built into the timings. Similarly, introductions and summaries are likely to need more time, so take this into account.