SEVEN WAYS TO MAKE VIRTUAL TRAINING COME ALIVE

By Afshan Kinder | Published in Near Shore Americas: September 22, 2020

The era of full-day, face-to-face training is over. In March, most contact centers shifted to a hybrid or fully work-from-home model. Virtual training has become the standard practice. But for most trainers, using technology like MS Teams, Google Meets, WebEx, Skype, and Zoom has been like jumping into the deep end of the pool without knowing how to swim. The learning curve was steep. It meant a paradigm shift in how we train people. Six months into this shift, many virtual training programs range from passable to poor. Online fatigue is rapidly occurring. Since I have successfully designed and delivered hybrid training for the last five years, often clients ask: "How do we create greater engagement and energy with our virtual new hire training?" The key is making it fresh, fun, and engaging. Here are some ideas to help.

Develop a virtual training strategy:

1. Leverage a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning to engage different learning styles. Design self-paced (asynchronous) eLearning modules so new hires increase their knowledge of products, processes, and policies at their own speed. Since new hires are working from home, it does not matter if they do eLearning at 10 am or noon, as long as they are prepared for a live session with their trainer at 2 pm. Intersperse knowledge modules with live (synchronous) virtual sessions. This is so trainers can check for understanding and create opportunities for new hires to apply that knowledge. For example, through an eLearning module, agents learn about the importance of protecting customer data. Then in a live,

instructor-led virtual session, they practice asking security questions to verify a customer's identity.

2. Ensure learners achieve a passing grade before moving to the next topic. Think of it like stacking one building block on top of another. If a learner does not master the knowledge and skill for a given topic, they will be overwhelmed by the next one. In traditional classroom training, testing might have been done once a day or once a week. However, virtual training allows you to build in frequent "micro-tests" such as using polls to check for understanding.

Make virtual training interactive:

3. Each training activity should have a defined learning outcome. Beware of "enter-train-ment!" That occurs when a trainer uses videoconferencing activities to dazzle their audience with entertainment, rather than focus on learner needs. Activities such as chat, raising hands (virtually), polls, video clips, break out rooms and white boarding sound intriguing. However, each activity has a learning curve since learners need to be trained to use it. It is crucial to ensure each activity has a well-defined learning outcome. Does a video clip improve learner's retention of that material? Does a breakout room discussion help new hires brainstorm approaches to a customer problem? If so, go ahead and include that activity. Just be sure each activity increases knowledge and skills, rather than merely entertain.

4. Make it safe to share. Many new hires do not want to be put on the spot and may feel awkward on camera. No one wants to feel embarrassed. To optimize learning, it is a must to create a safe virtual environment. Provide an example of the same active listening, paraphrasing and empathy skills you want new hires to use with customers. Paraphrase answers to make new hires feel heard and understood. Acknowledge new hire questions and concerns with empathy. If necessary, ask a follow up question to guide them to the right answer, rather than telling them they are off track.

5. Create engagement by doing an emotional "temperature check." Instead of verbally asking, "How is everyone doing today?", ask them to add an emoji to the chat window that reflects their feelings. You can also use the order of submission from each learner to ask a follow up question such as, "You used a smiley face. What put a smile on your face today?" or "You used a frown emoji. What can we do to help?"

Heighten your senses and build your emotional intelligence (EQ) as a trainer:

6. Virtual training requires greater EQ than classroom training. Analyzing reactions onscreen versus onsite demands greater attention to facial expressions and vocal tone. Look for signs of doubt or confusion. Listen for a slight hesitation or "flutter" in a learner's voice. That may indicate they may not understand the material. Pay attention to those subtle clues.

7. Dig deeper to truly help learners. Paraphrase and confirm understanding before answering questions. Take extra time to discover the underlying reason for a new hire's question. That may reveal gaps in their understanding, so you can help them fill in the entire picture.

Moving from classroom training to virtual training requires an updated skill set. While this is not a comprehensive list, these selected techniques can help you transition to virtual training. We do not have an option anymore. Thanks to remote and hybrid teams, virtual learning is here to stay.

Afshan Kinder is a partner at Switchgear Ltd, a contact center consultancy. She has more than 30 years of experience in telecom, utilities, financial services, packaged goods, e-commerce and technology, working across all communication channels in contact centers, retail and 'in field' sales and service. Her client list includes TELUS, Transcom, BMO InvestorLine, Nestle, Canadian Tire, Scotiabank, Air Miles, Jenny Craig and Ceridian.

Away from the client's site, Afshan sits on the Greater Toronto Area Contact Center (GTACC) Advisory Board and is a contributing author to three books: Call Centers for Dummies, Game Changing Ideas: 10 Years of SwitchGear Insights and the Amazon Kindle best-selling book Called to Action. Afshan also speaks at conferences throughout North America.

When Afshan closes her laptop, she enjoys live music and comedy with her husband and her two bossy cats, Frankie and Maui, who ensure she understands who is number one.

Connect with Afshan at afshan@switchgear.ca!