

Training during a Pandemic

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I was driving home to Oregon from Seattle on a Friday afternoon this past November. Sitting in traffic on the Fife Curve, I noticed a bumper sticker that said “What’s Next? A Giant Asteroid?” I smiled all the way home. Along the drive, I had time to reflect on what a difficult and trying year it had been up to that point. I thought of the many people that have lost their jobs (some of whom I know), of those who may lose their homes to foreclosure or eviction, of those who were struggling with depression and anxiety in quarantine, and those who have, perhaps, lost a loved one to the coronavirus pandemic. I actually said to myself “...I can’t wait for 20/20 to be a blur!”

My thoughts turned back to the previous week where I had been providing a five-day multimodal training program. I thought of the logistical challenges we’d overcome and how the training was received by the client – was it effective? Could they hear me clearly through my mask? Were they focused on other things in their lives that may have distracted them? How can I make this better? How will my company survive if this pandemic continues? Is there a better way?

I became ill in the last week of the previous January. At one point I even went to a hospital where they diagnosed me with a simple flu - but it was nothing like any flu I had experienced before. In fact, it wasn’t until February 25th when the CDC declared that “...COVID-19 is headed toward pandemic status.” And then everything stopped...at least on the training front. Our company went to Plan B – work from home, communicate through Zoom, soul search, strategize and figure out how we keep our staff employed, fully engaged and stay in business.

With no income for almost three months, we faced a number of challenges and I was genuinely worried about having to lay off my employees. We have an amazing staff and I’d invested tons of time, money and sweat-equity into building a company and investing in our employees – developing and honing their skills, letting them run different parts of the operation independently...I don’t want to lose them!

Taking Stock

During the first two weeks of the recommended quarantine, our employees stayed home and worked on finishing various projects we already had in the pipe. After a mandatory two-week quarantine, we met to strategize and figure out how we go forward, collectively. We thought of methods of delivering training and new revenue streams that we could tap into to keep ourselves busy and employed. We thought of ways to generate new revenues and decrease expenses. All unanimously agreed to suspend their 401K contributions indefinitely so that the company would save on matching contributions and employees would put more in their pockets.

Although we were all fearful of what the future might hold, we were also optimistic and excited about new opportunities that might present themselves. I believe that the time we took to reflect and discuss the future brought our crew even closer together.

I conducted a “hazmat boot camp” for three weeks at the beginning of the second quarter to indoctrinate three new employees I had brought on in January/February, just as the pandemic was beginning. For three weeks, I taught them hazard communication, general safety, general awareness and function-specific training. They helped me revise and update existing training programs, develop new training programs and even overhaul our company’s website.

I taught one employee Adobe Photoshop and how to use several web-learning development tools. I taught another how to develop a series of short training programs on various safety related topics, which have become the foundation for a new online university. I hammered him on the importance of drafting well-written objectives and maintaining focus on those learning objectives. Does the content reflect the outline you’ve created? Are the training objectives met? Does the summary restate the objectives?

We also expanded into waste management, packaging, product labeling, safety data sheets and other ancillary areas of expertise.

New Approaches to Training

I am a firm believer that the best training is in-person, tailored to the clients needs and products, and focused on their objectives. However, in-person training is not the only way of providing training and, in today’s environment, it is not easy to do.

Initially it was exceedingly difficult to coordinate on-site training. As I had indicated, there were no in-house training opportunities at all for essentially three months. Many customers were concerned that they might be exposed to coronavirus from outsiders, while others had experienced outbreaks at their facility and did not want to spread it to us. So, we had to find news ways to deliver the training, in-person or remotely, to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

So, we’ve taken several new approaches to training.

On-Site, Physically Distanced Training

We offer on-site, physically distanced training. Rather than having everyone crowded around a conference room table, we’re conducting training in larger spaces (e.g., auditoriums, warehouses, extra large rooms) whereby we can project onto a clear wall or screen the training we’re providing. It’s amazing what a 4K document camera and a laptop can do. It’s a perfect substitute for a white board or PowerPoint presentation. It gives you an opportunity to customize the training and keeps students actively engaged. Plus, it’s a chance for me to show off my drafting and sketching skills!

There are still some challenges though, including: securing a room large enough, getting high speed internet access, speaking through a mask and hearing students (although a small lavalier mic helps with that tremendously). In several locations, the client has provided a microphone on a stand in the auditorium whereby students can ask questions so that everyone can hear clearly.

To reduce the spread of contagions, we practice physical distancing, have dispensed with the traditional handshakes, offer sets of materials in sealed plastic bags to be opened by the student,

and have lots of surgical masks and hand sanitizer at the ready. Please note that we purchase the sanitizer locally as it should not be shipped on an aircraft.

Remote Group Learning

Admittedly, this one is a bit challenging, but I'm getting used to it and it saves on travel and logistics costs (e.g., hotels, meals, airfare). I've set up a pseudo-studio in our offices whereby we're able to offer training for up to 50 people (12 or less is optimum) on various topics. This requires a lot of preparation and coordination though. Manuals have to be shipped and distributed or downloaded and printed from a secured webserver beforehand. Then, you have to test the connections, sound, delay, speed, etc. beforehand – this is probably most challenging because everyone's connection is different.

At the beginning of each class, the instructor must lay down some basic ground rules such as punctuality, placing microphones on mute, raising hands, giving others an opportunity to speak before interrupting or responding, breaks, meals, etc. Following the introductory period, a break is warranted. But be careful! Keeping people engaged in Zoom is like herding cats! There are lots of distractions. Be generous with the breaks as online learning is compressed and almost twice as intense as in-person learning but hold firm to the allotted break times. As a rule, you should not go for more than 50-60 minutes straight.

You should also consider the 20-20-20 rule. To prevent fatigue and serious eye strain, encourage students to look away and focus on an object 20 feet away for a full 20 seconds every 20 minutes. Also, encourage them to dim their screens, look slightly downward at the screen and sit at least 25 inches away from the screen. If they have matte filters, encourage students to use them.

To ensure that exam integrity is maintained, you might consider sending out different exams (e.g., A, B, C) to a group of users as it discourages the sharing of answers (e.g., through private chat). You might also consider an online testing system, whereby an authenticated user is given an exam that is randomized and, therefore, completely different from each other. This also preserves the exam integrity as a printed copy is not released to the public.

I strongly suspect that this method will become more popular as customers recognize the cost savings from logistics and travel. Additionally, more and more employees are being encouraged to work from home - if not full time, at least part time.

Learning Management System

A well-managed Learning Management System (LMS) provides a great medium whereby authenticated users can take a variety of courses, complete exercises, download useful tools from a resource library, take exams and even generate Certificates of Completion.

We've been very fortunate to have built a Learning Management System (LMS) many years ago and we've seen a dramatic rise in the number of students that are taking advantage of this resource.

The downside to this training method is individuality. How do you tailor a program to a specific company or set of products so that is meaningful to them and meets the DOT's requirements for function-specific training? Typically, it is much more costly to develop a tailored web-based training program for a specific customer, particularly if it is going to be professionally narrated, but the costs can be dramatically reduced if you craft a well-written template and then create company-specific modules that focus on their particular products or procedures.

There are many different Learning Development tools that are commercially available. I've used many of them and each has unique features. They tend to be awfully expensive and, in some cases, incredibly challenging to learn. But the results can be excellent. I have written dozens of online training programs and I have found that next to in-person training, this is a practical solution that is quite suitable for these circumstances and actually quite attractive to smaller mom and pop operations that cannot afford to have an in-house training program, or those that cannot afford to shut down the operation to attend a weeklong course in Orlando or Phoenix.

If you're considering developing web-based training – do your homework. Consider investing in a copy editor, a graphics guy, an IT person and a professional narrator. It makes the learning experience much better! If you're considering using web-based training to meet the DOT's requirements for initial or recurrent training, be sure to obtain a copy of the course outline and objectives. Consider a supplemental function-specific training program or module to meet your function-specific requirements or company objectives. Evaluate different available programs and perform a simple cost-benefit analysis. Take into consideration the benefits of web-based training versus waiting for in-person training when it is next available. Also, inquire whether there is group pricing or tiered discounts.

Self-Study

There are many courses available for purchase and many of them are excellent. However, this a tricky way to conduct training. I have found, as a trainer, that the most effective way is through in-person, instructor led training – I guess that would depend upon the instructor of, course, but generally this is true.

If you're relying upon a Self-Study program to conduct/receive training, be sure that you download and read the course outline and objectives and you have available to you the resources that you will need to complete the training (e.g., reference materials, online or expert telephone support). I would not recommend this approach unless it is being considered for recurrent training, whereby, a seasoned veteran is brushing up on the latest requirements, or those support tools are close at hand, and it is used in an apprenticeship type program whereby a trained person coaches or mentors the new employee. The dangerous goods training requirements are difficult enough – trying to learn it from scratch by oneself using a workbook can be daunting!

For those persons that are considering developing a self-study program for use by one's employees, be sure to follow the advice that I've given my employees that write training programs. Draft an outline and write 3 or 4 objectives for each learning module. Always keep the objectives in mind when drafting the text and ask yourself - were the objectives met? Refine the objectives and summarize them at the end of each learning module, chapter or section.

Then, provide plenty of practical exercises and make the scenarios as realistic as possible. Do the examples include those products, packaging, and quantities that are routinely shipped by the company? Are the objectives clear, concise, and well-written? Do the test questions reflect the material presented in the text? Does the training reflect the most current regulatory requirements?

And, if you're considering making self-study training available, please be sure to develop and provide a useful library of tools, exercises, links and other references in order to enhance the training experience.

These are just some of the methods whereby training can be provided during the pandemic and, indeed, beyond this period. There are, of courses, many other ways to provide training – practical factors, apprenticeship programs, gaming, etc. You should consider investigating these other forms of education and look for ways to enhance the learning experience or deliver quality information.

If anyone is interested in learning more about our experience and how we were able to train during the pandemic, please call or email (steve@shipmate.com, +1 (310) 600-5241), or contact the directors and staff and DGTA via email (info@dgta.org) or by phone at +1 (901) 290-2270.

Best Wishes for a Successful and Healthy 2021 and beyond!

- Steve