

REMOTE LEARNING

7 Ways to Keep Virtual Training and Remote Meetings Engaging

August 11, 2020 • Carol Lempert • 6 min read



If your organization has started offering virtual instructor-led training (VILT), you may be receiving calls for help from facilitators asking how to make those sessions fun and interactive.

Employees, too, are demanding more engaging programs. One training manager I know received this message from a desperate participant:

We used to have Death-by-PowerPoint. Now we are having Death-by-webinar.

Please. Do something!

Below, find seven fresh ideas to breathe life into remote training sessions and meetings.

1. Shorter Is Better

First, rethink how to use time. When presenting remotely, shorter is better. We normally experience the world through our five senses, but in the virtual world, we're limited to only two of our five senses: hearing and sight. This telescopes, or compresses, the online experience.

Because of that compression response, we lose focus more quickly than when we are face to face.

The best way, then, to grab and hold attention is to deliver content in short bursts of five to seven minutes. Sequence an activity or engagement break after a learning burst for maximum retention and participant involvement.

2. Setting Expectations

To ensure participants will engage with an activity, it's important to set expectations for behavior at the beginning of the session. Your goal is to focus everyone's eyes, ears and hands on your topic. You can accomplish this goal by starting your session with technical housekeeping, a subtle way to signal to the group that you will be giving them instructions — and they should follow them — without explicitly saying, "I'm going to be telling you what to do for the next hour." Technical housekeeping is simply inviting participants to try each feature of the platform they will be using throughout the program.

Chat

For example, one function I use often is chat. During technical housekeeping, instruct participants to open the chat and type a short word or sentence into the window. It's important that the word or sentence can be typed quickly; waiting more than a few seconds for words to appear on the screen causes people to lose focus.

Questions that work well and build relationships are:

- How do you say "hello" in your mother tongue?
- Did you eat breakfast today? If so, what was it?
- What is the weather like today in your city?

As answers appear on the screen, read a few of them out loud, and add a personal comment of your own.

When participants type into the chat within the first two minutes of the session, you'll achieve more engagement later, when you ask them to use it for content-related questions.

Virtual Applause

An additional way to use the chat feature is a technique called virtual applause, a visual substitution for clapping. Ask participants to type a stream of exclamation marks into the chat whenever they hear something they like or enjoy.

Encourage them to practice virtual applause right away by saying something like, “Let’s give Samir a big round of virtual applause for his consumption of a chai latte this morning!”

It’s fun for both facilitators and participants to see rows and rows of exclamation marks piling up. Let people know they can show their virtual applause at any point during the session. “How about right now?!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Several training managers who have introduced virtual applause to their team meetings have said it’s a great way to show appreciation for their colleagues.

Renaming

Another tactic to encourage participants to type within the first two minutes of the program is to ask them to rename themselves.

Often, people show up to training with a default name in their video tile, which could be their email address or only the initials of their first or last name. Options here include asking participants to:

- Rename themselves with their first name only.
- Add their home office or city to their name.
- Create a superhero name that starts with the letter of their first name. (I’m often “Colorful Carol” when I teach.)

The point of technical housekeeping is to have attendees’ fingers on the keyboard — and not checking their email or doing other work.

It’s important to set expectations for behavior at the beginning of the session.



Once you’ve set expectations, begin your program. After the first five or six minutes, you’ll want to involve the learners again. Here are some additional ideas:

3. Finger Polling

Many training managers and facilitators already use a polling feature within their platforms, and these tools work well to capture attention. However, if you aren’t polling as part of a survey for research purposes, a better activity is the finger poll. Finger polling gets people physically, as

well as mentally, engaged with your topic.

Instruct participants to put themselves on gallery view. Then, ask a question with three possible answers — for example, “Which vegetable is not a vegetable: broccoli, cauliflower or tomato?”

After you’ve asked the question, tell participants to vote for their selection by holding up one finger for broccoli, two fingers for cauliflower and three fingers for tomato. (The answer is tomato, by the way. It’s technically a fruit.)

You can also use a finger poll as a spot quiz for content you’ve just gone over to test participants. Finger polling works best when there is a series of at least three questions. Keep track of who answers each question correctly, and then offer a prize for the winners.

4. Conversation Starters

A proven way to reengage participants is to change what they see on the screen.

Instruct participants to turn off their cameras for a moment, and let them know that you will ask them to turn them back on shortly. Then, ask a yes/no question relevant to your content.

For example, let’s say you’ve just introduced the idea that including stories as part of a business presentation helps an audience retain the main message of the presentation. Follow this teaching point with a question like this: “If you have used stories in the past month in a business presentation, turn on your camera.” Then, invite whoever has turned their camera back on to share their experience.

Afterward, either ask everyone to turn his or her camera back on to rejoin the class, or instruct participants to turn their cameras off and then ask another question. Each time the cameras turn off and then back on, the new visual layout grabs participants’ attention. Plus, you’ll gain an immediate sense of how familiar and/or comfortable they are with the information you are introducing.

5. Recruiting Volunteers

Your curriculum may require participants to demonstrate an activity. A quick, equitable and fun way to select a volunteer for an exercise is to use the online [wheel of names](#). Type in participants’ names, and spin!

6. Annotation

The annotation feature is one of the more creative features available in most platforms. It taps into people’s inner artists.

To use this tool, create a slide with the heading, “Practicing Annotation.” Instruct participants to turn their annotation feature on and select one of the images available. Then, ask them to annotate the slide. Let them know they can make a mess. Here’s an example from a recent session:



You can then invite people to annotate directly onto a slide with content you’ve prepared related to your topic.

This method works well at the end of a training session or meeting, when you are summarizing all of the tips discussed. Simply show a slide with a list of takeaways, and ask everyone to mark which of the items he or she will incorporate back on the job.

7. Don’t Train Alone

A final thought: Virtual sessions require three areas of competency: technology, pedagogy and subject matter expertise. It doesn’t matter how well designed the learning journey is or how compelling the content is; if participants are struggling with technology, the session will be a bust.

For this reason, I strongly suggest that every virtual program or meeting have one person dedicated to managing the platform and another to teaching the program. Hollywood understands that in order to deliver quality content, the work behind the camera has to be as seamless to the viewer as the work in front of the lens.

The same is true for remote learning. If a facilitator has to spend 10 minutes helping one participant out of 20 with a technical issue, 19 people will have disengaged with the workshop and started checking their email by the time the session continues. Or, worse, they will be sending an email begging you to “please do something!”

Now, you have seven “somethings” to do!

A quick, equitable and fun way to select a volunteer for an exercise is to use the online wheel of names.



Carol Lempert

Carol Lempert is a sought-after leadership development expert who has been quoted in Forbes, The Financial Post, Reader’s Digest and The New York Times. She started her career as a professional actress and now helps leaders and their teams increase executive telepresence by teaching them the skills actors use to have great screen presence. Clients also bring her in to design virtual learning solutions that help people tell better stories, improve their personal brand and develop their presentation skills.