



Teaching the Intangibles

By Lauren Smith

Soft skills can be learned in a virtual setting if trainers follow certain presentation tips.

Without exception, managers and trainers highlight the importance of interpersonal skills as one of the critical components to success, but traditional classroom training is expensive and increasingly difficult to deliver to a diverse and mobile workforce.

That's why organizations are continuously searching for a method that builds interpersonal skills without summoning the entire staff into a seminar room. One promising solution to this dilemma is web-based soft skills training. The contemporary workforce is accustomed to using the virtual and physical environments interchangeably. Podcasts, teleconferences, and instant messaging have become common workplace tools. Online training is a viable alternative to classroom training and is used to teach almost everything

from new languages to information technology security procedures to conflict resolution techniques.

Despite the numerous benefits of online courses, trainers should exercise caution when using a web-based format to teach soft skills, which are based on interpersonal interactions, and are therefore hard to learn virtually. Also, by definition, soft skills are more than just tangible facts. Participants need opportunities to interact and practice to truly learn them.

Nevertheless, more and more web-based training is being developed to

teach these softer skills. Online courses can effectively teach soft skills when properly designed and delivered. To ensure that your course will effectively achieve the best learning outcomes, consider the following tips for developing web-based soft skills training.

Training tips

Employees may believe that soft skills training is a waste of time, especially if it is taught online. Clarify the connection between the material presented in the course and your organization's mission. A good soft skills course will demonstrate to the participant why the course is important right at the beginning. For example, if the course is dealing with conflict-management tactics, the introduction should discuss how effectively dealing with conflict will result in more repeat business, better team performance, or other outcomes relevant to improving job performance.

Trainers should explain why the organization is investing in this type of training early in the course. Trainers also should illustrate the negative consequences that result in a lack of soft skills. Providing examples of times when poor interpersonal skills resulted in a bad situation for the company or an individual will grab participants' attention and create a perception that this course is worthwhile.

Include peers and other respected individuals in a discussion about the importance of a particular skill. Peers should provide anecdotes of how effective use of the particular skill promotes success. They will solidify the fact that this training is important to the job. In a course on customer service, nothing is more powerful than hearing from people who give examples of terrible customer service experiences and then discussing ways that the service representative could have handled the situation better, highlighting the points taught in the course. Also consider using short testimonials about how other employees used soft skills that were learned in training.

Pitfalls

Although adapting content for web-based training can be difficult for any subject matter, there are several pitfalls that a trainer should avoid when developing soft skills courses. One common pitfall is to skimp on the interactivity. Online courses that consist of merely a set of text-filled screens tend to provide minimal transfer and application of the knowledge. Material in a format that encourages participants to think through how to apply a skill in a variety of situations and contexts will not help participants actually learn the skill.

Another common temptation is to teach all of the content using the same teaching method. For example, if you have great graphics or a really interesting video, the temptation is to build a course around this one medium. It is important to remember that variety is crucial to effective web-based training because it helps keep participants engaged and focused on the content.

Make abstract soft skills concepts more concrete and applicable by providing steps, definitions, illustrations, and examples of how to use the soft skills. Approach this with questions, such as, What does effective use of the soft skill look like? What does ineffective use look like? Demonstrate ways for participants to evaluate their current behavior and gauge their proficiency at using the skill. For example, if you are developing a course on improving teamwork, give scenarios that illustrate both poor and excellent teamwork skills. Participants will remember why Bill caused the team to fall three months behind or how Tina was able to get everyone on the team to contribute to the report, but they may have trouble retaining general team building concepts.

People are more likely to practice and learn the information presented in a web-based course when they are engaged and enjoy the course. This means using a combination of different types of exercises and incorporating audio, video, and graphics into the content. A course that resembles slides in a PowerPoint deck will not engage the participants.

Focusing on behavioral indicators will help make the concepts more concrete and help the participants gauge their own skill levels and provide them with ways they can improve their soft skills.

Use multiple choice and true-or-false questions immediately after a section of difficult content so that participants can check their comprehension. Then use more complex applications such as hypothetical scenarios. Application questions such as case studies are particularly effective in helping participants learn soft skills. For example, in a case study, participants could practice thinking about how to influence others by answering the prompts based on the scenario provided. Participants could then record their answers to the questions and compare their responses to an expert's answers. This is an excellent way to achieve another important goal—to provide feedback.

Provide expert feedback to participants throughout the course to make them aware of their progress. Immediate feedback is important to learning and should be incorporated into all web-based exercises where possible. Computer-generated feedback on responses to exercises or quizzes will serve as a self-check for the participants in the absence of an instructor. Include multiple choice quizzes in which participants learn the correct answers after completing the responses.

For more complex scenarios, many courses ask the participants to complete a case study but then do not offer any feedback on whether the participants' approach was correct. To remedy this deficiency, provide "expert" responses once participants have analyzed a case study. This tactic provides participants an opportunity to compare their analyses with the expert's response. Specific feedback will allow participants to gauge how much they are learning rather than just completing the course to check a box.

In addition to the exercises and feedback included within the course, participants will benefit from additional

practice with others outside of the virtual environment to continue honing their soft skills. At the end of the course, provide a framework for participants to ask peers for feedback on how they are doing. In a web-based course, visualizing practice of the skill (when physical practice is impossible or awkward) also will promote learning. For example, if the course teaches how to build rapport with others, include a practice worksheet for participants to think through how they would act when becoming acquainted with a new colleague. Provide prompts based on the course content such as "What background information would you need?" or "What might you say to start the conversation?"

Once participants visualized practicing the skill using a hypothetical case study, provide a framework for participants to ask for feedback in actual situ-

ations. For example, after a particularly difficult meeting, participants might have a set of questions to ask a respected peer for feedback such as "How were my active listening skills? Did I demonstrate proper body language?" Prompts such as these will give participants easy ways to apply the concepts learned in the course to their jobs.

Soft skills training will continue to be important for employees in all types of professions. When classroom training is not available or feasible, web-based training is a viable alternative. Demonstrating how learning will promote success on the job, using peers to endorse the training, breaking the skills into concrete learning modules, using a variety of graphics and exercises, providing feedback throughout the course, and creating opportunities to practice the soft skills learned will help to ensure online that training is a success.

Finally, remember that solid content is at the core of effective training. To develop helpful content, use sound development approaches and identify tangible learning objectives just as you would in a classroom course. Ultimately, the course is only as good as its content.

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