



WHITE PAPER SERIES

Live Training vs. E-Learning: *Which is Best?*

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I am the CEO of a legal management company that offers only live training (classroom and webinars) and not instructorless computer based training (which I will call e-learning). You might think, therefore, that I would always say that live training is the best solution. However, this is not so. In fact, there are many situations where e-learning or at least a blended solution is going to be better. This is especially true when the focus of the learning is communication of information, and not the development of skills or application of complex ideas. E-learning is often the only solution when students are geographically dispersed and work schedules are so fragmented that classes simply can't be offered at specific times. That being said, there are some obvious and more subtle benefits to live training – whether in a classroom or a live webinar - that make it a better value when teaching a complex subject like legal management topics.

1. Once managers are in a room (that's the hard part!) they are free from many workplace distractions.

Let's face it. For those of you who have taken an e-learning course at home or on the job, how long did it take you before you were distracted by something? Your kid? A co-worker asking you a question? Checking e-mail?

Now that's not to say that managers won't try to do some of these things in a live presentation, or a webinar, but a good speaker will be able to captivate an audience and handle any distractions. Of course, a well-designed program won't even give students the chance to multi-task because they will be too involved in the activities that are a part of the program. This is even true of a well designed webinar. Our webinars are designed to obtain interaction at least once every three minutes, and at times we ask a question a minute. E-learning, by contrast, is often self-guided. Since you can restart a module where you left off, distractions abound.

The live training benefit: Managers concentrate on the topic, start thinking about their past experiences, ask deeper questions, and leave with a "To Do" list to implement back at work. They change their behavior – which is why you have training in the first place, right?

2. Good instructors calibrate their presentations to the audience.

Managers come to class with varied backgrounds, strengths and knowledge about both the law and management practices. Experienced instructors modify their explanations to meet students' level of experience. While e-learning can try to accomplish this through different programs, or layering of explanations, a live instructor can and will continuously adapt to meet student needs, whether delivering in a classroom or in a live webinar.

The live training benefit: The program starts where the managers are – the more knowledgeable the group, the more sophisticated the program. Managers get the information they need, without wasting time on “the basics.”

3. The open exchange of ideas helps students learn how to think through a problem and deal with challenges.

The law is often easy to state, but how it applies to complex fact patterns is not always clear. Sometimes there are multiple possibilities depending on one's interpretation of the facts. Or if you change a fact, you sometimes need to change an answer. Bottom line, there are many nuances that go into handling challenging employment situations. Live training is best equipped to handle these complexities and nuances. By working through scenarios in small groups students are exposed to a variety of ideas and perspectives. Students also learn how to deal with challenges that come up to their ideas – something that will inevitably happen in the real world.

The live classroom benefit: Managers do not learn a static list of do's and don'ts that won't help them in the real world. Instead, they learn a way of approaching these issues.

4. Answering students' questions helps them to synthesize and understand the material.

Live training beats e-learning hands down on this one. A knowledgeable instructor is able to make complex material come alive by answering student questions. These questions and answers – openly shared with all students – expand the pool of understanding for everyone. But for this to happen, all students must hear all questions and answers in real time.

Often the best questions are follow-up questions to a question another student asked. Since many of these questions build on each other, an e-learning solution that has students individually ask questions and receive answers (which are often delayed) loses much of the value that comes from questions.

The live training benefit: Students get the benefit of all questions asked and can apply what they've learned to their current issues back on the job.

5. Creates a shared experience reinforcing a sense of community and corporate values.

As the speed of business quickens and the use of technology and telecommuting grows, something inevitably gets lost. Whether you call this something "shared experience" or "the human touch," it is an essential factor for organizational life. Live training is often a vehicle for reinforcing a sense of community and remembering shared values and goals.

The live training benefit: Corporate values come alive and are reinforced, not just by the trainers but by the other participants.

6. Relationships get established that support other business objectives.

One of the hidden gems of live training is the development or renewal of workplace relationships. I've seen students' faces light up during introductions when someone looked across the room and said "so you're so and so...we've been talking on the phone now for 2 years. It is so great to meet you." In one class, engineers from different parts of the country came back from lunch telling me that they solved an engineering problem that they had been working on remotely for weeks. I see students during breaks exchanging business cards and solidifying work relationships with peers in different groups.

The live training benefit: Though difficult to quantify, live training gives us an opportunity to learn from each other and see each other in a powerful way. This result is most likely to happen in a classroom and to a lesser extent in a live webinar, with almost no chance to occur in an e-learning environment. These relationships established through shared live training have a positive impact for students personally as well as for the bottom line.

Conclusion

When employers look at the cost of live training, they often conclude that e-learning is better. But that is only one side of the equation. The purpose of training is to change the ways manager do their work and to create cultures where people work well and productively together. Live training is far more effective in accomplishing these goals. When you consider the cost and benefit, live training – when done well – is clearly the best value.