Training for Two

Engaging in-person and virtual attendees simultaneously is a balancing act that's possible with preparation and hybrid-training savvy.

BY KRISTIN GRAHAM

It was less than five minutes before I was supposed to launch a 90-minute hybrid workshop to a group of 85 MBA students. I had taken all the proper facilitator steps such as arriving early, bringing my presentation on a thumb drive, and putting new batteries in the slide clicker.

However, when the IT guy shrugged and said he couldn't load the screen with the online room view and chat box, it was time to improvise. I walked up to a few students with open laptops and said, "You are now my megaphone for the online crew. I'm going to ask for input throughout the session, and I need you to raise your hand or shout out their comments." They became co-stars in the blended learning experience and added accountability for me as a facilitator to ensure I was bridging both audiences into a seamless experience.

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As that example shows, delivering to hybrid groups requires preparation and flexibility. It also requires structure, sizzle, and social elements to enhance hybrid learning experiences.

Structure

Before a hybrid event, spend ample time on the preparation details, including tech checks, software downloads, the in-room layout, how you structure the content flow, and everything in between.

When preparing the calendar invite, take extra care with the event details and anticipate both learner groups' needs. Repeat the physical location and online links in the location field and the invite body. Including contact information for questions or technical support makes it easy for learners to find if an issue arises before or during the course. Likewise include details for the chat channel, question queue, and whether there will be a live Q&A session. If it's important for remote attendees to be on camera, give them a heads up. Learners also will appreciate knowing when scheduled breaks will take place.

When your session begins, keep the 10 minutes, 10 percent rule top of mind. Audiences start to lose attention every 10 minutes, so look for ways to engage them with interactive elements such as polls, visuals, and videos. Also pay attention to your vocal variance.

If you're using an existing presentation designed for traditional delivery, trim about 10 percent of the content. Doing so allows extra time for you to react to learners' needs and provides them with added time to absorb the information and interact with you and the other participants.

Even with well-paced content, learners can benefit from a highlight reel that calls attention to the presentation's main points to help key messages stick. A bookend approach where you display a key takeaway slide at the beginning and end of the session enables the audience to get a preview of the content at the start and a recap for mental recall at the end. You can also package them as a participant handout (see sidebar).

If you're able to enlist training partners, such as a colleague or other stakeholder, have them engage with online and in-person learners. One idea is to have an in-room participant join the online stream to monitor that viewpoint, flag any tech issues, and make sure you don't miss online questions or comments. In both rooms, consider having someone help distribute any material so you can stay focused on delivery.

Pacing and pausing is especially important in the hybrid environment. Slow your speaking speed by a beat or two to allow for tech (and brain) lag. Likewise add a placeholder in your material to serve as a natural pausing point to review online activity and respond to questions and comments from either audience.

Explore the option to have an additional screen in the room that displays the online chat.

When was the last time you experienced your own session? Professional athletes watch game tapes of their performance, and facilitators should do the same. Record your session on the online platform (and in the room, if you can) and review it later. Viewing the recording will help you gain insight into the learners' perspectives, which will enrich your future content creation and delivery.

Sizzle

With a solid structure in place, you can focus on elevating the audience experience. Welcome kits are a great way to generate audience excitement before the event. Contents can range from learning collateral and swag to snacks. Consider sending a physical kit to remote learners a few days ahead, and you can distribute kits to in-person attendees on the day of the event. You can also use technology to make a digital kit via a customized QR code, dedicated social channel, or a unique link that participants can use to access handouts, contact info, and post-event material such as surveys, photos, and video clips.

To activate learning in advance, transform the experience into a learning lab versus a lecture. Use the strength of both asynchronous and synchronous learning to have participants engage with your content before the event. For example, launch an online learning module, an explainer video, or a channel where people access and engage with material in advance. That can free up the live learning time to be an active workshop where you can cover highlights, clarify points, address questions, dive deep into idea sharing, and guide the groups in learning activities.

Simple technology can create an immersive and intimate learning experience. There's no need to make huge investments in the technology—to scale interaction, make ample use of standard tools such as breakout rooms, chat, webcams, and slides.

Remember: Attention spans are limited, so plan for mental calories in the form of idea snacks—such

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The Takeaway Sheet

A longtime communications philosophy often attributed to Aristotle is: Tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you told them. One simple way to do that is to create a one-page recap sheet with key content highlights. Think bullet points, not paragraphs. The purpose is to give the audience a flow-and-know guide that captures the key takeaways and enables them to follow along with the content during the session.

Include a couple thought-starter questions, action items, or conversation prompts at the end. That provides a backup plan in case of tech glitches or late starts. Send it to all attendees before the session or share it online at the start along with paper copies for the room. That way, if one audience needs adjustments or support, you have a go-to place to direct attention in the meantime.

Let the audience know that you are providing a handout as an added benefit for their learning. Reference it in the session description or calendar invite and mention it at the beginning of the event as well.

as a video clip, musical interlude, or poll—that serve as intervals between heavy content. Real snacks don't hurt either. For longer sessions, consider sending virtual attendees a prepaid link to a food delivery service. Invest in their needs (and stomachs) and they'll give their attention in return.

Social

Knowledge transfer is often higher in a shared learning environment because group participants are more likely to remember information when it's shared aloud instead of just hearing it from a presenter.

One way to add social elements to the hybrid training experience is to open the remote room a few minutes before the official start time. Communicate your plan in the invite so that virtual attendees have the option to arrive early to engage with one another before the session begins. Opening the room early also enables you to test all the tech features and greet early online arrivals before doing the same in the physical room. As faces fill the online room and in-person participants arrive, set the mood with music. I've learned that the energy starts before the content does.

In addition to ensuring that all participants can see the learning material, explore the option to have an additional screen in the room that displays the online chat, or invite the in-person audience to view and interact with the online room on their own devices. That enables the in-person group to see the virtual conversation and build onto ideas and comments, creating a more interactive experience.

Encouraging in-person learners to bring laptops or other compatible devices to interact with online learners enables you to blend breakouts rooms with online and in-person participants, which fosters hybrid collaboration. Along the same lines, when responding to a question from either audience, ask for input from the rest of the group before responding. Essentially, you're facilitating a crowdsourced question-and-answer session. People become more active listeners when there are multiple voices. If the in-person group isn't connected to technology, provide index cards as a workaround so people can write notes that you collect and share.

Another way to engage participants is by asking questions that require a response from both audiences. It could be a simple yes or no question where the in-person learners raise a hand and the online learners add a "+1" to the chat, drop an emoji, or use a reaction button. Such physical interaction activates the brain and can help boost information recall as well as an affinity with the subject matter. Near the end of the event, ask online attendees to share any key takeaways from the session and instruct the in-person participants to raise their hands for any that resonate with them as well and vice versa. The shared connection plus the physical action help cement the learning highlights to memory.

The community aspect is just as important as the content in hybrid learning, so design ways for your audience to be your costars and be part of the learning experience.

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