

Getting Started With Webinars

Overview

Delivering well prepared, short targeted bursts of learning can be an even more effective method of training, than longer classroom-based sessions. With this management guide, you'll learn how to get started with webinars that deliver results.

More and more organisations are moving some of their training and internal communications to webinar-delivery - that is the use of web-conferencing technology. But as e-mail has often not been as effective a medium as was first thought, so many trainers find their first attempts at operating in a virtual classroom not as successful as they hoped. The lack of face-to-face contact is one key hindrance, as in a real training room a lot of the messages are transferred and interpreted by the physical reaction of those present. In some ways, it's easier to recover from a bad classroom incident than in a virtual session.

We are also much less familiar with being taught in a virtual classroom, so are therefore less able to gauge the skills and knowledge required to be a trainer in such an environment. We are also faced with a new technology and sometimes struggle to see how that can be most effectively employed.

But webinars will form an important part of our training delivery channels in the future, as they reduce the need to travel and this wholeheartedly fits with the environmental responsibilities that all organisations are taking today. Costs of delivery are dramatically reduced too and the so-called "speed to competence" is improved by being able to reach larger audiences, over shorter timescales and bring the learning directly to the workplace of each participant.

When to Use this Guide

You should refer to this guide when you are:

- Deciding whether a webinar is the best option for your training or communications requirements.
- When choosing the platform you'll use to deliver your webinars.
- When considering what resources you will need to ensure a successful session.
- When developing the structure and content of your webinar.
- When delivering your webinar.
- Reviewing a previous webinar and looking for ways to improve your next session.

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10-Step Action Plan

Step 1: Clarify the Purpose of Your Webinar

It's essential that you carefully consider the reason for wanting to develop a webinar. Webinars are more than just a broadcasting opportunity. You are asking people to take time out from their business day and whatever your motivations for doing so – and however important they may be to the organisation – these may not be shared by all of your audience and you'll be competing for their time.

If all you want to do is deliver a message with no or little requirement for immediate feedback, then do consider if a webinar is really the best vehicle for this. Sitting in front of your PC listening to someone speaking isn't necessarily a great communications experience. But if it's key that people should hear someone speak – maybe he or she has a great motivational presence – then consider making a narrated slide presentation available via your intranet (or web) or even creating a podcast.

If you are keen to embed a key message or learning into the workplace, then you will need to ensure that you have instant feedback and a chance for those taking part to interact in some way with the content and the speaker. For this purpose, a webinar can be just what's required.

Step 2: Consider Your Audience Size

Webinars work best when everyone has a chance to interact during the session. The larger the audience, the more difficult this is to manage. So if you have a very large audience, you will either need to re-think if a webinar is the most appropriate method or at least limit your interactions to those that are more easily managed, for instance, the use of polls to check understanding or opinions after every topic covered.

If you want more interactivity in order to help reinforce the messages you're delivering, then try to keep group sizes to between 12 and 20. This will impact on your scheduling, but at least you'll be more assured that your content will be received more successfully.

Step 3: Choose Your Platform

There are lots of web-conferencing systems out there. Most are now hosted by the vendor, so you don't have to worry your IT department too much. Most offer a core set of features and if your organisation doesn't already have a system, then look for the following:

- **Text chat windows** - useful for asking for questions and reflective comments. But if you're not happy for your attendees to start chatting privately to each other, then make sure you can turn off that particular feature.
- **Polling** - useful for gauging opinions before a topic and for checking understanding afterwards.

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- **Interactive whiteboards** - these are great as they allow the group to brainstorm ideas from their desktops directly into the webinar room, but check to see how user-friendly they are and if they allow simultaneous postings of content.
- **Emoticons** - as with other popular chat room software, these allow the attendees to make some attempt at communicating body language – but remember to tell your group that they are there and how and when to use them.
- **Annotation tools** - mostly for use when you are presenting a PowerPoint slideshow, so the presenter can draw attention to certain aspects – these tools are often shared by the interactive whiteboards.
- **Desktop and application sharing** - these are generally only relevant if your webinar is about some new software application or you need to show a PowerPoint presentation that has complicated builds that your web-conferencing system can't support, but make sure they are easy to use, as the switch back and forth between your presentation, for instance, and the application needs to be smooth.
- **Q&A question queuing** - some web-conferencing systems provide a separate window in which attendees can post questions that are only seen at first by the presenters, who can then choose later which questions to answer and can then post the replies and publish just the selected questions for all to see – very useful when you have a larger audience and a key-note style presentation.
- **Break-out rooms** – these are great if you have a small to medium-size group and would like to send people off into virtual breakout rooms to consider a question and then return to the main "room" to debrief the group. They are less useful if you have a large audience, as they do require a lot of management. At the moment, only a handful of vendors offer this feature. Do check how easy they are to use, however, as some are quite tricky to administer. Some teleconference operators (see below) also offer an audio-only equivalent of break-out rooms, if you don't require on-screen activity.
- **Video broadcasting** – most webinar solutions offer the ability to plug in a webcam and project live images of the presenter and attendees. In reality, whereas it can be pleasant at the very start and end of a session to see a wave from a friendly-looking presenter, seeing the presenter's every move can get distracting, especially if you are trying to get the attendees to focus on your content. Audio with an on-screen presentation slideshow is actually easier to follow than audio, a moving image and slides.

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As well as the basic features, there are also three other matters that you must consider:

- **Registration procedure** – what is required to set up the event and provide the attendees with their log-in details?; is there an option for each person to confirm their attendance? (Very useful for your own peace of mind that people will be logging on at the correct time.)
- **Plug-ins** – a number of the solutions on offer require the user to download a plug-in before they can take part in a session. Issues surrounding locked-down end-user systems and firewalls have resulted in many a webinar getting off to a shaky start as attendees are prone to not following the instructions given to them ahead of time. If you do not have control over your audience's computers, then try to avoid solutions that require plug-ins (some only require a plug-in for the presenters). Otherwise, make sure you work with your IT department ahead of time and build in a process for getting your audience to perform the download at least a day before the webinar.
- **Teleconferencing service** – you will need a teleconference to provide the audio channel for your webinar. The best option is for an integrated teleconference service, where the web-conferencing vendor also provides the telephone service. This means that the set-up is usually much easier and you can control some of the teleconferencing features - such as muting phone lines or dialling out to people who don't have a local access number – from within the software itself. Failing that, you'll have to sign-up to a separate teleconferencing service. In both cases, also decide if you need to record each webinar for archive and replay purposes. Some vendors can do this, but only with a hardware solution installed on your phone line. Others can offer this from within their own platform. One final note – due to the different telephone technologies around the globe, if you are trying to involve a truly global audience, you may find that the integrated teleconference option is only offered on a regional basis.

Step 4: Appoint Your Webinar Producer

If there is one key best practice that's emerged over the last few years, it's that attempting to deliver a webinar alone is not only tiring, but often complicated, as switching between presenting mode and system administration mode, e.g. operating one of the tools you want to use, requires a lot of skill and finesse if it's to be done smoothly. There are also those questions from the attendees to consider, people raising their hands mid-session demanding your attention and people who suddenly find they can't hear you or have lost their on-screen view of the session.

It is therefore strongly recommended that you appoint a so-called webinar producer – someone who can work the technology for you, leaving you to concentrate on your message and your communications with your audience. The webinar producer should be very familiar with the technology and, of course, the session itself (see Step 5). They should also keep a separate phone line open during the session, in case they need to speak to an attendee. At the start of the session, they should be introduced to the attendees as the person to whom private chat messages (with problems or private questions) can be sent. In fact, why not make the webinar producer the person who performs the "meet and greet" service at the very start?

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Step 5: Develop Your Session "Screenplay"

Unlike a face-to-face presentation, webinars need to be precisely engineered, along the lines of a film screen play, as you need to ensure that not only do you keep on-track time wise, but that you are able to remember what tool to use next. Webinars are highly choreographed events.

Using a spreadsheet, title the columns:

- Time
- Objective
- Content
- On-screen
- Activity
- Notes

Step 6: Develop Your Script

Before scripting your session, divide your total session time down into the shortest time period possible. For instance, between three and five minutes, reflecting the average attention span of your audience members. Note the start and finish times of each timeslot in the first column of your "screenplay". Some activities will only take a minute or less to complete, so don't be afraid to go back later and change some to 30-second time slots, as required.

In the next column, write the objective of each activity you propose to deliver, e.g. to introduce the presenters to the group or to debate the merits of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in terms of our appraisal system. This helps you to keep focused on the core messages and not to "wander off".

In the third column you can sketch out what you want to cover and say. If you are going to deliver the webinar a number of times, then there's no harm in scripting your narration out in full here. Of course, it's best not be "heard" reading it out during the webinar, but at least you won't forget to say something. You can also time how long it will take to say what you need to cover, checking back to the allocated time, to see if you need to adjust this.

In the next column, you can enter what will appear on the screen at that point in time. In most cases, this will be the bullets on your PowerPoint slides. This is a great way to practise extracting just the key phrases from your full script in the previous column, so you're not tempted to type exactly what you say. You should also check back to the second column to see if your on-screen content does achieve the objective you set for that activity.

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Step 7: Build in Interactivity

As we've already said, webinars are most successful when they are interactive. As a rule of thumb, you should aim to include some form of interaction every three to five minutes, i.e. within the average attention span period.

You may wish to post up a polling question, or ask people to take a minute to think about what you've said and then for everyone to post a question or comment in the text chat window. If your group is small enough, ask them to annotate a fresh whiteboard with an idea.

The next column should contain the instructions for the activity you wish to employ at that point in time. This will also be especially important if you are co-delivering the webinar with a colleague in the producer role. As it's essential to give clear instructions at this point, you may also wish to script what you will say at this point too, reinforced with on-screen instructions. Remember to set aside enough time in your "screenplay" for the activity to take place, including the briefing time and any time required for your producer to set up the activity.

Finally, the last column in your "screenplay" is reserved for any special notes you want to make.

Remember – keep "telling" to a minimum!

Step 8: Rehearse Your Webinar

If this is your first webinar, then there's a good chance it will be a "first" for many of your attendees too. You should aim to rehearse your session, in real time, with your producer and ideally a guinea-pig audience. Use the rehearsal to practise your commentary and the coordination of the activities you use. Your audience will test out your instructions and will provide valuable information about how you can make these clearer. If you need your real attendees to register and maybe download a plug-in beforehand, then include this in your rehearsal planning to catch any issues that may arise here. Revise your "screenplay" accordingly afterwards and don't be afraid to schedule another rehearsal – you can never practise enough!

Step 9: Deliver Your Webinar

Before you deliver your first webinar, you'll need to issue any registration and joining instructions. You should aim to do this at least one week beforehand, if your audience knows it's coming, otherwise at least two weeks beforehand. It's also worth diarising to send out a reminder e-mail a day beforehand. Some web-conferencing systems can handle this bit for you.

Remember to stick to your "screenplay" as you deliver the webinar – that's its primary purpose. Stick to it ruthlessly, otherwise you could easily "drift off". If you find something isn't working, press on, but make a comment in the notes column of your "screenplay" to look at it for the next time.

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Here are some top tips for delivering your webinar:

1. Start on time – don't wait for late comers and people who have forgotten to download the plug-in. Your producer can follow-up with these people, providing that doesn't distract them from assisting you.
2. Include some session ground rules at the start of your webinar, e.g. don't put your phone on hold if your company has "music on hold"; use the "raise hand" emoticon if you have a question and ask your producer to offer an orientation to the webinar room and its tools before you start.
3. Always ask for verbal contributions from people by referring to them by their names. If you just ask, "Who has a question?", there is a very strong chance you will be met with total silence. So keep a list of the attendees' names (easier if you have a smaller group) to ensure you fairly ask questions of everyone during the session - and say, "John, what question would you like raise at this point in time?" This also sends the message that it's important for everyone to pay full attention!
4. Never spend more than two or three minutes in "telling mode". Even if you don't have any interactive exercises planned, pause and ask someone if they have a question.
5. If you have to perform some routine task – especially if you don't have the support of a producer – don't do this in silence. There's no harm in telling the attendees what you're doing, e.g. "I'm just scanning the text chat room to look for the common theme of your questions." This will avoid your audience wondering what's going on.

Step 10: Review Your Session

After the session, take time to relax. Don't immediately start thinking about how it went – that can wait an hour or so. Later, review the session - referring all the time to your "screenplay" and any notes you made in the last column - with your producer and decide where you will need to tweak the session for next time.

Look out for times when the audience seemed to "wander off" and didn't seem as engaged as at other times. What can you do to bring them back into the session? Did the interactive exercises run smoothly or did they confuse the participants? Can you improve the instructions, or even change the exercises altogether? But try hard not to abandon an interaction.

Did you stick to your script or, in the heat of the moment, did you actually come out with a simpler way to say something? If so, then re-write your script now, while it's still fresh in your mind.

Finally, did some of the content not work as well as you thought it would? If this was particularly complex material, then would it maybe work better as pre-reading? If so, then make sure you build in an interactive activity to test the understanding of that pre-reading – and make sure you tell the attendees when you send them the material that you'll ask questions on it during the webinar.

By following these steps, you'll be able to take advantage of the full benefits of webinar delivery as a cost effective channel for interactive and engaging training and internal communications.

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About Academy28

Academy28 supports individual and organisational development using a combination of technology and an in-depth understanding of personality type and individual behavioural preferences. The company has developed a rapid online behavioural preferences tool which links to everyday practical business challenges, such as team working, change management and influencing skills. It also enables trainers to match their delivery style with the learning styles of their audiences, in both face-to-face and virtual training environments.

Academy28 also provides webinar support services that empower organisations to take full advantage of live web-based training. The company offers virtual training programme development and delivery services as well as completely virtual programmes in launching, leading and supporting virtual teams. Also available is an online action planning and learning transfer tool.

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