

Blended learning for Soft Skills and Leadership Development: The *real* business case

If you've been following the research on the growth of Virtual Instructor Led Training (VILT), you may already be convinced of the business case for using this as part of a blended learning solution in order to:

- Reduce travel and accommodation costs
- Lower your organisation's carbon footprint
- Minimise delegates' time off-the-job
- Ensure all remote/home workers have equal access to learning opportunities

You may have had some success with VILT for product/customer, compliance or technical training, but have you adopted such blended solutions for leadership/management development, on-boarding/transition, or other 'soft skills' training?

In our experience, the key to success with blended learning solutions lies in the design of a totally bespoke programme centred on your business priorities. Rather than designing a classroom event supplemented with some pre- and post-course work to try and maximise transfer of learning to the workplace, we recommend that the programme becomes an integral part of the delegates' day-to-day work. Such a programme doesn't even need to be called 'training'. For example a 'Change Management for Senior Leaders' programme could be positioned as 'Getting ready for global growth' and sponsored by the CEO.

A key objection often raised when an organisation considers replacing, or reducing the proportion of, traditional face-to-face methods in a soft skills / leadership /management development programme, is that delegates won't engage with VILT. We suspect that the appetite for more virtual elements in a blended solution has been dampened by bad experiences with e-learning, webcasts, podcasts, vodcasts and/or the passive roles they have been given on webinars.

To change any negative perception of blended learning and VILT as a 'cheaper second-best' offering, we suggest that you design and deliver a bespoke learning solution targeted on a business-critical issue – something which keeps senior management awake at night and which will affect all staff. Having chosen a highly visible and important issue, you then need to ensure that you get both the design and delivery right first time!!

The ingredients you put into the mix must produce a 'whole which is greater than the sum of the parts'. This can be done by offering a wide range of methods (VILT, self-study on line/e-learning, face-to-face learning, handouts and references, on-line psychometrics and other diagnostic tools, archived sessions, chat rooms, Wikis, pod- and vod-casts, role-plays, voice training, one-to-one coaching/mentoring) which are mixed together in a way that offers

all stakeholders an innovative, effective and enjoyable experience which generates a high return on investment (RoI).

Whilst some delegates may never be persuaded to complete an e-learning course, or to read the latest article on Strategic Leadership, the blended learning menu offers them alternatives which accommodate individual differences in preferred learning style(s). With a totally bespoke solution, it is fairly to produce a 4-minute podcast summarising the key content covered in the handouts/articles which they can listen to on their Smartphone/I Pod at an airport or on their daily commute. VILT sessions can be recorded and archived for use by anyone unable to attend their session. It is this person-centred approach to learning and development which will win over the sceptics or those who have grown tired of 'same old, same old' courses.