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Virtual training can be better than the classroom

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New, controlled field test proves effectiveness of online alternative.

When it comes to creating lasting behaviour change in salespeople, the assumption is that virtual sales skills training is a pale imitation of in-person classroom training. But what if an online training alternative could be proven as effective, if not more effective than classroom training? Can you imagine the possibilities for your business?

Efficiency benefits

- Reducing up to 50% of the cost of training by cutting your related travel, classroom, and opportunity cost – without having to cut training itself.
- Avoiding the biggest issue your leaders have – TOOF (time out of field) – by delivering training that's in line with the workflow of your participants.
- Continuing training through tough economic times, like when you have a travel freeze but strategically need training to improve business performance.

Effectiveness benefits

- *Agility* – Providing just-in-time training instead of just-in-case training. You can quickly stand up situational training programmes to meet your acute strategic needs. Training programmes like communicating price increases, product launches, cross-selling opportunities, and renewals can be packaged and delivered online precisely when you need them.
- *Flexibility* – Deliver bespoke training instead of a one-size-fits all approach. Identify your key performance indicators, such as lagging pipeline, declining close rates, excessive

discounting, or lower renewals, by individuals or team, and then immediately deliver targeted training to your team based on these identified needs, instead of waiting for a spot on the calendar.

- **Scalability** – Execute large-scale programme rollouts in weeks versus months (or years) across your remote salesforce, including multilingual, global initiatives. Decrease your time to productivity and success, compared to the plodding roadshow to visit every location.

New study proves virtual can be better than live

Previous industry surveys by Corporate Visions identified that 65% of companies plan to increase their investment in virtual training alternatives (while classroom training investments remain flat or slowly decline). However, only 10% believed virtual training could be as good as live, instructor-led classroom events when it comes to behaviour change.

This begs the question: why buy more if you believe it's not as effective?

The research revealed that TOOF pressure from managers is the main concern. In fact, they ranked it twice as high as budget concerns. Which means many are willing to hold their nose and dole out virtual training to appease field concerns, while keeping their fingers crossed that it will actually do some good. Something is better than nothing, right?

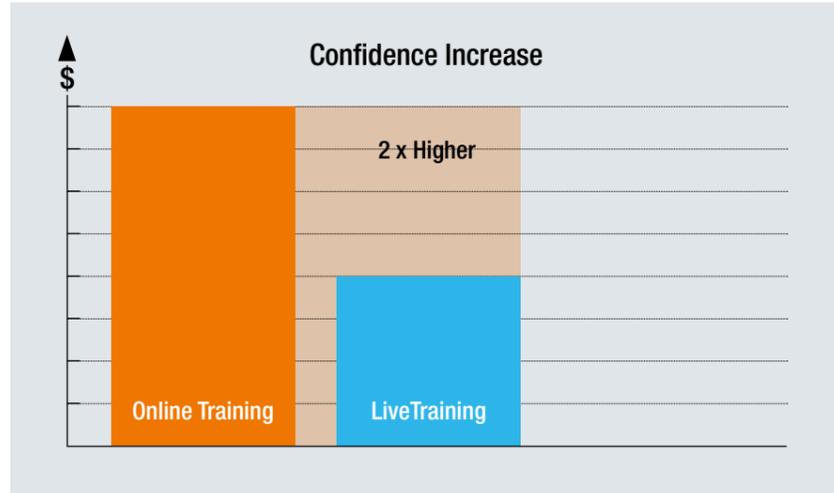
Not anymore. A brand new controlled field trial conducted by a Fortune 250 software company finally proves the power of online training in creating better outcomes, not just offering a more cost-efficient alternative. Online training can, in fact, unleash all the powerful, positive opportunities imagined earlier in this article.

The test was conducted using sales teams in the same market segment over the same time period. The reps were randomly selected to be part of one of three groups:

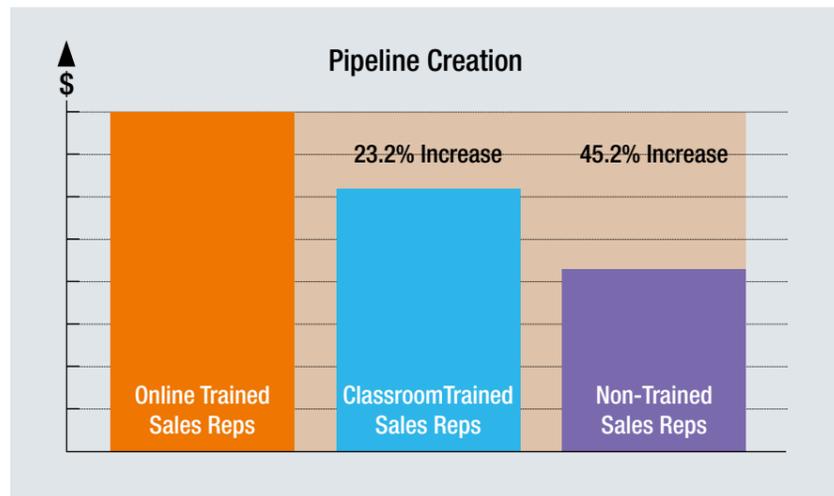
1. No training
2. Live classroom training
3. Online-only training

A before and after confidence survey was conducted to measure qualitative changes, and a group of data scientists reviewed their CRM data to determine quantitative impact in key performance indicators.

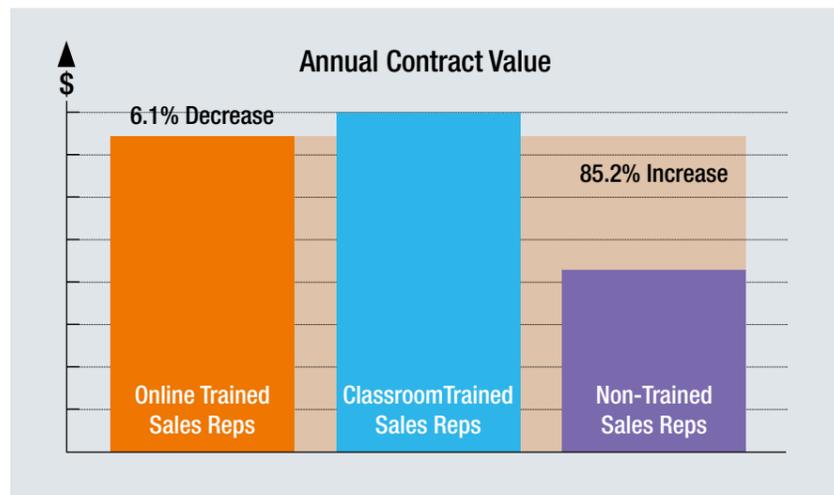
The important point to remember is that this was a highly controlled experiment. The only differences were whether they received training or not, and in what modality the training was delivered. Everything else – including



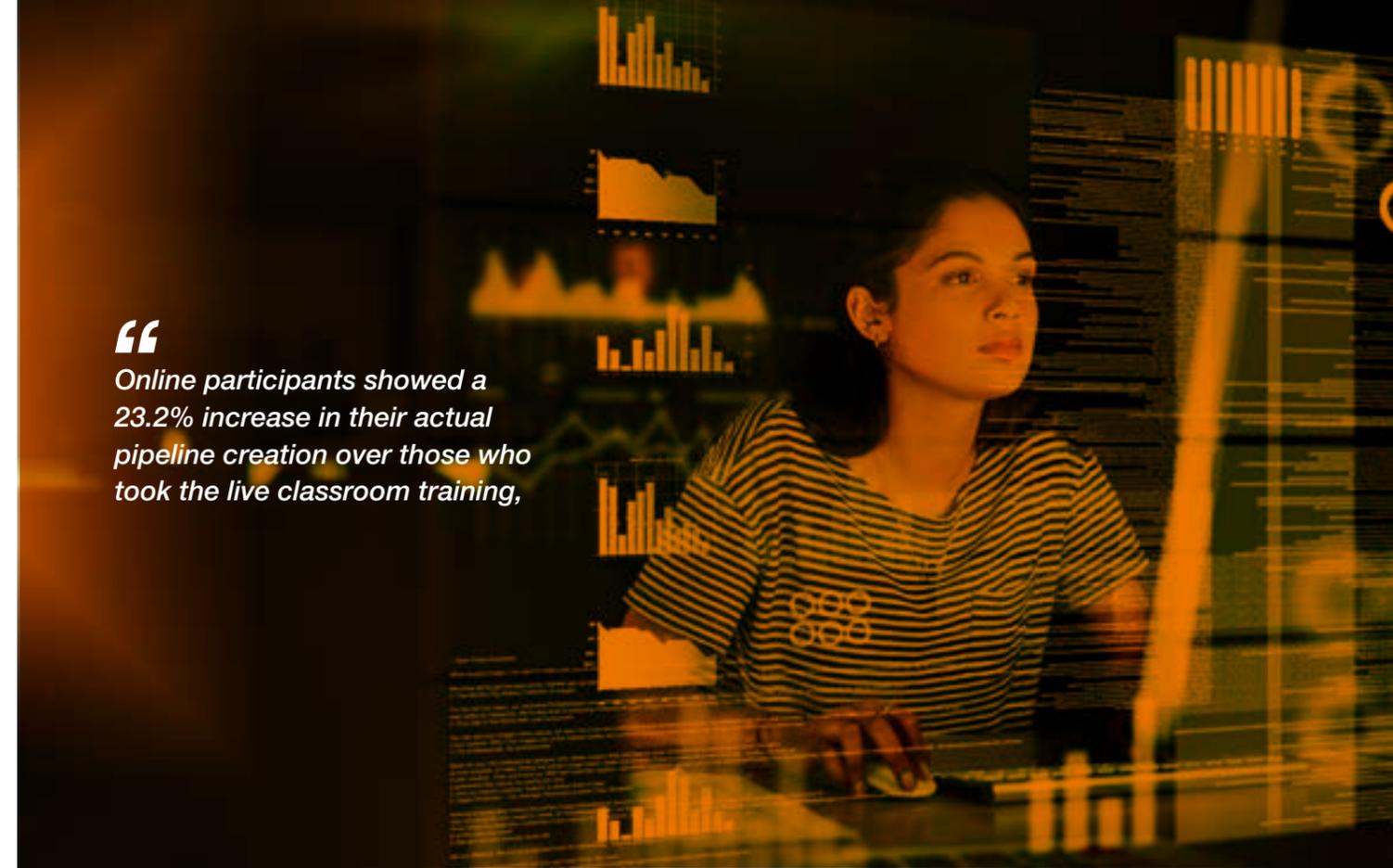
▲ **Figure 1:** Online training increased confidence by two times versus classroom.



▲ **Figure 2:** Pipeline creation improved 45.2% with online training.



▲ **Figure 3:** Online training improved annual contract value by 85.2% versus no training.



“**Online participants showed a 23.2% increase in their actual pipeline creation over those who took the live classroom training,**

participants, segment, and timing – was the same. This methodology provides a high degree of confidence when it comes to determining causation.

Results

Participants in the online training expressed a confidence increase after the training that was two times higher than those who went through the two-day, live classroom training (**Figure 1**). Specifically, the questions related to their confidence in conducting a selling conversation with an executive decision-maker. An important outcome for salespeople is feeling more confident having those important but often difficult business discussions.

The online participants showed a 23.2% increase in their actual pipeline creation – as measured in their CRM – over those who took the live classroom training, and a 45.2% increase over the control group who did not go through training (**Figure 2**).

The online participants showed a slightly lower annual contract value (6.1%) than the live, classroom-trained reps. But, still a significantly higher (85.2%) improvement over those who received no training at all (**Figure 3**).

If the debate is between whether it's worth it to train your people if you can't take them out of the field, these results should finally dispel that notion. It's

clear you can get a material improvement using online training. And according to the Fortune 250 company conducting the test, they considered the 6.1% difference to be “close enough” to convince them they can scale programmes more efficiently and effectively using online as a proven alternative to live, classroom training.

How to make virtual better than classroom

The success of this experiment demands a discussion as to what made the difference. How can you make the online experience as effective as the traditional gold standard of the live, in-person classroom?

The prevailing presumption has been that virtual sales skills training is a pale imitation of live classroom training. This is especially true if that virtual training is a bunch of self-paced “quiz to complete” online modules. Can you really expect a salesperson to demonstrate proficiency in sales process, presentations, executive conversations, or negotiations skills, simply by taking a few tests in an online module?

Fortunately, most sales leaders aren't so naïve as to believe that you can watch and checkbox your way to sales skills proficiency. So, most companies have turned their attention to virtual

classroom experiences – LMS (learning management system) online classrooms, web conferencing, or telepresence technologies – as a replacement for in-person classroom events.

Here's the problem with that approach. Upon further inspection, you'll find limitations to the virtual classroom that exacerbate some of the existing flaws of traditional in-person classrooms:

1. **Still requires time out of the field** – Ultimately, a virtual classroom still requires salespeople to carve time out of their work day to participate, just like an in-person classroom. While this format may include some e-learning beforehand, the live practice and coaching portion requires salespeople to be online and participating with colleagues and a live facilitator.
2. **Way less attention and accountability** – Because the environment is virtual, there's even less accountability for being engaged during the training and a greater chance that reps will be doing some heavy-duty multitasking on their day-to-day apps until they're called on to present. Research shows that 70% of participants in virtual classrooms will have another application like email open over the top of their session.
3. **Inadequate practice and coaching time** – In any classroom environment, you're always up against a clock to

get in the necessary teaching time, as well as practice/coaching time everyone believes is necessary for creating behaviour change. As you try to cram the classroom full of more people, you'll find that some don't get a chance to stand and deliver. Or if they do, their time is compressed. And so is the coaching and feedback. In a virtual classroom, this time crunch only gets worse. Reps can "hide out" or take a small role participating in quick team presentations, thus receiving even less detailed coaching.

4. It's treated as an event – Even though reps can be in a classroom for upwards of two days, it's still inescapably an event that comes and goes – just like the knowledge imparted and the coaching experienced. Still, with the in-person classroom setup, at least you had a few days of intensive focus, plus the ability to watch your peers perform and get feedback. The fleeting nature of the in-person classroom is even more pronounced in a virtual classroom, where reps have fewer performance requirements and less peer review.

While there are big, obvious cost advantages to the virtual classroom relative to the in-person training experience, there are fundamental limitations of in-person classroom learning that become insurmountable obstacles when you take the experience virtual.

A better approach to online

The breakthroughs that make it possible for online training to be as good as, and even better than live include several key differences from classroom options:

- Multi-touch, spaced learning – The strength of classroom-based events, whether virtual or live, is that they create a fast-paced, immersive learning experience, powered by energy, engagement, and rapport between talented consultants and sales reps. Their weakness is that this high-octane environment is confined to a relatively short interval of time.

When behaviour change and skills acquisition are at stake, that weakness can't be overlooked. Because events – no matter how outstanding in the moment – carry an inherent risk of diminishing returns. The impact of a life-changing training experience might be powerfully felt in the

immediate aftermath of the event. But how much does that positive impact degrade over time?

A better approach uses spaced learning, which unfolds in stages over multiple weeks, designed to enable reps to gradually acquire and retain critical skills. Best of all, this model doesn't interfere with their day-to-day workflow. Following this approach, reps acquire knowledge in chunks, engage in exercises, and review examples before moving on to a new concept.

- Recorded practice and coaching – Observable practice, detailed coaching, and demonstrated proficiency are absolute musts



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for behaviour change. But, as we discussed earlier, there are limits to the classroom practice environment made worse in the virtual classroom.

- Online assignments, such as recording yourself delivering a new message or demonstrating a new skill in a recorded environment is the difference-maker. Salespeople practice, record, and submit their assignments. They receive coaching feedback (red/yellow/green scoring across multiple variables) and get tailored recommendations for improvement.
- In some cases, we've worked with clients where participants may need to resubmit for pass/fail certification, and they can be pushed tailored follow-up training videos based on identified weak spots.

Here are some noteworthy advantages:

- More practice – Analysis shows that salespeople typically practice six times before submitting their mission, which, arguably, is much more practice than you get in a live or

virtual classroom.

- More complete assignments – Often, participants in live events are part of teams and only get to experience part of a role-play. Or, they miss a chance entirely when time is up in the room. In the online recording approach, everyone must do a complete assignment to demonstrate proficiency.
- More useful coaching – In the live or virtual classroom environment, the instructor is hard-pressed to give instant, meaningful feedback on the participants' incomplete performances. Also, no one is taking notes to capture the coaching. Online recorded assignments, on the other hand, receive scoring against a documented rubric and detailed, written coaching notes with explicit recommendations for how to improve.
 - Better peer examples – Watching your peers in a live or virtual classroom can be a painful exercise. Everyone is fumbling through their practice sessions with only the occasional star performance. In the online recorded environment, however, you can see and learn from only the best of the best examples among your colleagues.

The power of virtual finally realised

Online training with recorded assignments may seem like a radical departure from the in-person classroom model that's been the de facto standard of the training world for decades. But it's actually a doubling down on what sales training has always been about: practice, coaching, and demonstrated proficiency.

You can provide your team with training that works in line with the workflow of each participant. You won't need to take them out of the field. You can more quickly deploy and scale virtual training to meet the strategic demands of your organisation. And, you can do it knowing you're going to deliver the same or better results.

About the author

Tim Riesterer is chief strategy and research officer, Corporate Visions.