

Embracing the challenges of online training

Author: Rachel Falzon

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak the Malta Institute of Accountants (MIA) had to act fast to switch from face to face training sessions to online ones. This appeared to be a challenge but also an opportunity for tutors. The MIA got in touch with Rachel Falzon, one of the tutors who previously gave face to face sessions for MIA and now has switched to virtual training. Rachel explains her experience and how she adapted to such a change:

I would be lying if said that I wasn't apprehensive about delivering my first three-hour CPE session online at MIA. The context, medium for delivery and dynamics of tutor-participant interaction are staggeringly different and in many ways, the training content itself needed to be adapted for the new online dimension. There were plenty of challenges to overcome, although in hindsight, I have to admit that most of the challenges were mental.

Let's start with the actual content. Not much actually changed in this respect - I am an HR professional, I know my material, do plenty of research, look up latest available statistics and am happy to share my knowledge. Preparing the actual slides did not pose such a problem either although I was careful to use as many visuals as possible, minimise the amount of text per slide and use large font. Wherever I could, I also presented questions and quizzes as a springboard for 'discussion' and presentation of new ideas. I also interspersed the training with a few short video clips to add variety and give the participants a break from my voice. Could I have improved the element of training content in any way? Most certainly - I think that actually having less content would have been more beneficial.

I think the real challenge lies in knowing that in the online context, there is very little feedback from participants and few opportunities to interact, ask questions, carry out smaller group experiential-type activities and practical exercises. Basic visuals like an affirming nod, body language and eye contact are also painfully invisible to the tutor delivering the session so you need a lot of confidence in the belief that participants are following throughout. Given the large number of participants, it was also not possible to unmute individual participants' microphones so using the chat function was indeed the life-saver here. I tried as much as possible to chunk the training session into well-defined mini sessions by using clear signposting (Part1, Part 2 etc) and incorporated a series of questions at the end of each part to allow for some 'discussion' and exchange of ideas. Most participants were happy to contribute and I felt this chat-driven feedback, despite coming nowhere near replacing the face-to-face feedback trainers are used to receiving, served a two-fold purpose: affirmation that the training was impactful and that participants were in fact actively following. I also sent over a two-pager printable workbook that I could refer to during the course of the session and use for individual exercises and consolidation of ideas. It was quite easy to then compare answers with a pre-prepared slide and discuss via chat any conflicting answers.

Perhaps what really helped too was the time dedicated to breaking the 'online' ice at the very start of the session. Asking a few questions, like "What's your name?", "Which part of Malta are you from?" "Are you missing the office?" gives a sense of who else is on the call with you and you can address participants by name too when reading out any comments

via the chat.

Finally, of course, there is the challenge of getting used to the technology. In the span of a few days, like most of you, I found myself fully-functional with Zoom, Webex, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams... Delivering a three-hour session using one of these tools is, of course, a whole other story and not being much of a techie is certainly no help. I did in fact have second thoughts about whether I should proceed with the delivery! Not one to give up so easily, I set about following some YouTube clips and a LinkedIn training session on how to use the preferred platform of the MIA, organised a few sessions with my supportive family (from one room to another) to give me the opportunity to practise getting online, sharing my screen etc and then finally set up a quick demo session with the MIA CPE coordinator who patiently went over the process again and helped me set up well in advance of the session on the day.

I think what's really key is to not be afraid of experimenting with new media and finding better and better ways to deliver your content with impact. As with any training session, preparation is critical and you need to practise with your tools to be able to deliver a professional session online, as you would also in a face-to-face session. A lot is the same - even if the online dimension is so different! Since online learning has been around for so long and is set to become an integral part of L&D, the faster we learn to master the tools, the better. Of course, nothing beats face-to-face interaction but a blended or online approach, can work too!

Finally, I wanted to add that all the team at MIA, Ishmael, Elisa, Dorianne and Pauline, were extremely supportive with the technical side of things and it made a big difference knowing there was someone to help if I encountered a technical glitch (which of course, did happen).

Rachel Falzon is an HR Consultant and founder of ReWired. She is passionate about developing people and building stronger organisations.

