

The NIIT logo is a red circle with the letters "NIIT" in white, bold, sans-serif font.

**NIIT**

# Enabling the Successful Transition to Virtual Training Delivery



# Introduction

Since the start of this millennium, there has been a noticeable shift in the manner in which organizations prefer to run their training programs. A couple of decades ago, onsite classroom education was the only choice available to enterprises. This is understandable, given the fact that virtual conferencing tools were still in their infancy and yet to mature into full-blown alternatives for collaborative learning. All that has dramatically changed over the years. While traditional onsite classroom training still has its place in the training ecosystem of an organization, the advantages of moving a majority of the training programs to virtual environments makes business sense from the learner and business stakeholder perspective.

Current versions of virtual collaboration tools have broken down the barriers of communication to such an extent that almost anything that can be done in a closed physical classroom can be delivered with equal effectiveness in a virtual environment. It is also interesting to note that over the last decade, nearly two-thirds of the global workforce has been gradually switching to working remotely at least once a week, because people are better equipped to engage in virtual training sessions than ever before. Given this background, and based on our experience, switching to virtual training delivery can offer the following advantages:



Virtual training programs are cost-effective in terms of infrastructure and travel.



Virtual training programs are truly scalable and can easily be replicated for multiple iterations with slight variations or customization.



It is easier and more practical to organize virtual training at periodic intervals instead of attempting to bring all participants together for a “one time” event.



Participants with different work priorities can enroll in virtual classes scheduled flexibly. This is imperative in modern work environments with strict work deadlines.



Class-fill rates for ILTs have dropped significantly over the last few years, therefore it is important to have a good balance of ILTs and VTs to improve participation.



Virtual training programs have the flexibility to use multimedia, web conferencing, and other IT utilities to make learning more effective and interesting.

## NIIT's Experience

In the late nineties, as the industry was beginning to experiment with virtual modes of training, NIIT was one of the first to embrace and adopt these new age methodologies of virtual training. This led to NIIT earning the trust of leading technology companies as we migrated from face-to-face training modules to virtual training. Our first mover advantage evolved into a massive mechanism of upskilling our then existing pool of instructors to teach online courses.

NIIT designed the T3 (Train the Trainer) programs that embraced the process of virtual classes and equipped instructors with tools and resources. The T3 programs had an in-built feedback process for pilot classes, a curriculum adapted for virtual courses and most importantly, enhanced improvements and refinements in the soft skills and presentation modes.





# Best Practices in Virtual Training

We have gathered many best practices along the way in addition to carving out some ourselves. We summarize our learnings here:



A key element in the success of VT (Virtual Training) is the ability to keep an audience engaged by presenting the material in a manner that demands intensive audience interaction

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Emphasis on two-way communication between the instructor and participants and reduced monologues from the instructor.

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Interspersing the session with lively anecdotes, case studies, and Q&A

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An instructor with a neutral and easy to comprehend accent.

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Sessions broken down into convenient capsules of presentations and lab work respectively

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The use of appropriate conferencing tools tailored to the needs of the course. The tools are used to facilitate efficient, smooth and engaging presentations from an instructor and student perspective.

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Lab environments hosted on the cloud, or through software supplied by the customer.

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Optimum bandwidth especially for global training.

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Accurate and succinct lab guides and instructions written to minimize instructor involvement and articulated clearly to avoid assumption.

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Focus on converting foundational courses to virtual platforms first since these are typically easier from a conversion perspective.

# Key Challenges in Virtual Training

Virtual training presents some key challenges to both instructors and participants, specifically:



## Instructional

The primary challenge in successfully hosting virtual training is the instructor's psychological belief that training done face-to-face is far more effective than done otherwise. However, most standard instructor-led classroom curriculum can be taught virtually, with a few format and presentation related changes. The key element is the instructor's own belief and conviction that training can be delivered virtually without compromising on quality.

Some factors to keep in mind:

- > Instructors conduct the training from a comfortable environment including a quiet home office.
- > Instructors have access to all materials and notes that they can refer to at will, while delivering the class. (This is a great boon, especially when teaching a brand-new class, or an advanced class where a lot of questions may not be part of the prescribed curriculum).
- > Instructors should avoid being self-conscious and focus on effective teaching rather than worrying about their appearance and physical posture even if they are visible through their webcam. They should be comfortably seated against a neutral background in case they are visible.



## Participants

The biggest challenge for participants to remain involved and engaged in class. Lack of supervision can lead to distractions that can dilute the quality of learning.

Here are a few pointers in retaining the attention of the audience:

- > Keeping participants involved in dialogue is critical. Quizzes, polls and the exchange of real-time use cases are some tools that are critical for successful virtual classes. Instructors should be coached to run classes in an engaging manner.
- > Present the course material with clarity, passion and confidence.
- > The participant material used to follow along should be specifically designed for virtual training. It should complement the instructor's presentation and shouldn't distract the learner in any way.
- > It is critical to engage each participant by giving him or her sufficient attention individually and collectively by helping them during lab time, and assistance through emails and other means.
- > Ensuring that the conferencing environment and labs are available uninterrupted during a class.

## Typical Cases for Virtual Learning: NIIT's Experience

Over the years, we have understood that virtual training is becoming more acceptable among learners than the traditional approach. Here are a few cases that have been adapted successfully.

When a module is lab intensive, it is preferred that participants work from the comfort of their homes or work environments. This will enable them to proceed with lab exercises at their own pace without having to rush through them during instructor-led live classes. In many cases, we have structured our virtual programs in a manner that allows for three to four hours of lectures/demonstrations in the morning session, followed by labs in the afternoon. Participants are free to log off from the learning platform and work at their leisure during the rest of the day. The only requirement to enable this is to ensure that labs are easily accessible without technical challenges.

By segmenting content-intensive instructor-led courses into smaller, multiple virtual training courses with increasing levels of complexity the learner can seamlessly progress from fundamentals to advanced levels in a structured manner. For example, a five-day ILT course can be broken into two-day basic and three-day advanced courses, delivered virtually or in hybrid mode.

In classes where theory is intensive and the content is tailored to an advanced audience, for example, ITIL based courses, it is beneficial to have participants have full access to all resources and materials in order to develop their cases studies and presentations. Delivering them virtually gives participants the time to engage in more fruitful research and analysis.

# Pitfalls to Consider while Planning for Virtual Delivery

Though virtual training programs prove to be cost-effective, there are certain factors that we must consider:

- 1** Ensure that the content is articulated and formatted appropriately for virtual delivery. This is critical and must be done meticulously for each course we offer.
- 2** Instead of amending an existing ILT course, it is often better to rewrite a course specifically for VLT by keeping the base material intact and enhancing it with visual and interactive elements.
- 3** Courses that have the right blend of labs and theory are better suited to the virtual platform. If any of these components are in excess, it makes the content either more strenuous or monotonous.
- 4** Instructors must be specifically trained in the art of virtual delivery. It is a false assumption that any Instructor can step in the shoes of this role. A T3 is a must to ensure proper transition.







## Transition to VLT

We believe that every organization has distinct training needs. While no two approaches are identical it is possible to standardize approaches with standard industry best practices and utilize NIIT's global experience to introduce the necessary checks and balances needed for this process.

What follows in this whitepaper is meant to be read as a general approach to virtual delivery and how NIIT can facilitate that transition.



## How NIIT Sets up Virtual Training

Transitioning from a predominantly instructor-led setup to a virtual or hybrid model cannot be an ad hoc decision, or an unplanned activity. It needs careful consideration based on the following factors:

### Quality and structure of the course

While it is theoretically true that all courses can be delivered virtually, NIIT has found that in some cases it may not be practical to do so. A course that leans heavily on lab activities with complicated user interfaces and less theoretical content will lead to:

- > Lack of learner participation.
- > Inability of the instructor to effectively debug or assist students. While cutting-edge lab environments and conferencing facilities can facilitate this process, it is imperative that each course is evaluated individually for virtual training. As a rule of thumb, any course that is migrated from ILT to VLT should have a somewhat equal mix of theory and activity.

### Course content specifically written for ILT

If learner and lab guides are written in free text as traditional reading material, it is difficult to convert it to VLT. One of the advantages of VLT is the use of self-paced learning and other visual artifacts during learning process. This means that VLT material used in class should be short, precise and succinct. In many cases, it is easier to build VLT material from scratch rather than pruning existing content.

### Instructor readiness

NIIT has found that it is worthwhile moving shorter ILT courses which may be one or two hours in duration, into VLT initially. This helps us migrate existing instructors to the new format and structure and have them deliver a successful class, before delving into longer and more complex courses.

### Capturing the essence of a training module

Studies have shown that the average learner attention span in virtual classes is significantly less than classroom training. Therefore, before transforming an ILT course, we must thoroughly assess if the virtual mode can showcase the key elements and objectives of the training without compromising on the details of the subject matter and interest involved.

### Class size

One of the significant differentiators between ILT and VLT is number of participants to be accommodated in each session. In classrooms, size is physically limited by space, but in VLT we could theoretically have an unlimited number of participants. The reality, however, is that in a VLT, a batch size of more than twelve can adversely impact the perceived quality of delivery. Given the lack of physical presence and sustained individual attention, participants begin to absorb less, rendering the entire objective futile. The actual number also depends on the nature of the content. If the content is more theoretical, then it may be practical to include 20 to 25 participants. However, more than 25 participants per session should be avoided at any cost.



## Interaction during VL sessions

In our experience, we have found that there are three principal ways of capturing and retaining learner attention during virtual training:

- > Quizzes: Short review questions, for which answers will be polled.
- > Emoticons: Use of emoticons in conferencing tools to solicit participation.
- > Sharing screens: Participants are encouraged to share lab screens to help generate a sense of involvement and “over the shoulder” class experience.

## Duration of Virtual classes vis a vis Instructor-led

Normally, Virtual sessions should be of the same duration as that of ILT, unless there is a mandate to break up a course into shorter modules. For examples, a typical five- day ILT class could be broken into:

- > Introduction - 2 days
- > Advanced operations - 3 days

This gives participants and class schedulers the opportunity to balance work and training schedules optimally. In cases where it is tough to pull out participants for five days at a stretch, training could be staggered across weeks or months.

## Thorough study of existing course and materials

One of the most important lessons we have learned over two decades of helping organizations transition to virtual training, is that we must evaluate courses thoroughly and deeply and tweak it appropriately for virtual purposes. Often, it may be impractical to convert an existing course into VLT, and a rewrite would be far more effective. In some cases, we may be able to prune, convert or transform an existing classroom course into VLT without any changes. It all boils down to the individual category of the course, and learning objectives defined for a participant.

## Process of T3 (Train the Trainer)

The most critical part of the transition from predominantly ILT to VLT is the need to educate, realign and channelize existing or new instructors into this stream. Though it may not seem challenging, it has been our experience that the greatest impediment to successful virtual delivery is not the obvious infrastructural deficiencies, but more so, the inability of seasoned Instructors to adapt to this new mode successfully. Some factors to consider are:

### Identifying appropriate instructors

The fact is that not all Instructors can teach virtually, though they may be subject matter experts. The key points to keep in mind while choosing Instructors are:

- > Good communication skills.
- > Ability to talk to a variety of audiences (virtual classes will normally have a wide segment of students from diverse cultural settings).
- > Extremely good command of the subject covered (Preferably the best ILT instructors with consistently good feedback).
- > Pilot and test delivery before going the distance.
- > A critical factor is the interest of the instructor to deliver training virtually. There are many cases in our experience where we have found instructors unwilling or showing less interest in teaching virtually. These could be due to cultural, economic or personal preferences. Before we go through the process of actual induction, consent must be obtained on the willingness and commitment of instructors for virtual delivery. Virtual classes could also be

scheduled at odd hours depending on time zones. Potential subject matter experts must be made aware of these factors before taking on these assignments.

### Workshops

The only practical, efficient and workable formula to formally induct Instructors into the virtual domain is to conduct two-day structured workshops on processes and methodology. In our partnership with leading customers, we set up periodic sessions in different locations in the US and Asia Pacific. We solicited participation from potential instructors nominated for virtual training, and conducted focused sessions from experts on important aspects of virtual delivery, such as:

- > **Standard instructional practices in virtual mode:** NIIT has developed a set of standard technical and non-technical procedures and practices which work well for virtual. We customize that list for our customers to ensure that their specific objectives are met.
- > **Etiquette:** Given the geographical, cultural and social distribution of a virtual class, there are some important considerations when it comes to speaking and conducting oneself in class. There are certain topics that need to be avoided under any circumstance, while some topics can be touched upon based on target audience demographics. Over the years, NIIT has standardized many pointers for instructors.



- > **Time management:** Ability to allocate enough time to materials, labs and discussions. This is critical in VLT and requires demonstration and practice for mastery.
- > **Audience participation & management:** It is easy to lose participant attention in VLT's. Hence, it is extremely important that Instructors follow best practices and evolve their own techniques to involve participants in class. This is an area that improves over time and may be difficult to convey or teach effectively. This involves many factors such as personality, conversational skills and social skills and must be considered while identifying instructors.
- > **Shadowing:** This involves the ability to look over the participant's shoulder during labs. Normally, this is achieved through the web conferencing facility we use, or in some cases our customers have lab infrastructure which supports such shadowing.
- > **Proper use of Web conferencing tools:** Depending upon agreed tools and methods, it is imperative that instructors are aware of all aspects of using such tools. Though tools like WebEx, Zoom and Live Meeting are ubiquitous these days, it is not necessary to utilize all the features available. Therefore, during T3 training, we focus on educating participants on the important features to be used during classes.
- > **Specific customer processes:** We incorporate customer-specific processes wherever needed.
- > **Mock sessions:** Potential Instructors are asked to make a 30-45 presentation during the concluding day of T3, depending upon the number of participants in the session and the time at hand. We seat them separately in a different room and have them teach virtually to the rest of audience. These

mock sessions are an invaluable tool to assess which SME has natural flair for such delivery, and who needs additional time and coaching to mature into one. While such workshops may be conducted virtually, it has been NIIT's experience that it works better if these workshops are scheduled onsite. The outcome of these T3 sessions could be a joint certification by NIIT and the customer

## Pilot sessions by experts

Mock pilot classes from NIIT experts help participants learn the nuances of virtual training. This is usually the next logical step after participants have attended the T3 session.

## Customization

It is imperative that training is customized for specific customers so that it is optimized to the needs of their learners.

What we have detailed in this white paper is a comprehensive set of areas and ideas to help an organization transition some or all of their training to virtual modes.

Write to us at **[businessimpact@niit.com](mailto:businessimpact@niit.com)** for a no-obligation focused discussion on how NIIT can help facilitate this transition for your organization.



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