Productivity Methodologies, Tools, and Techniques

Making distance disappear: training via videoconference

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With recent advances, information and communication technology (ICT) has become more accessible to broader audiences than ever before. The many advantages of ICT attract people who want to obtain knowledge and information. People can find out about events that are happening in other parts of the world in real time, without being hindered by distance and time. ICT has progressed greatly as a tool for training purposes and has become available at reduced cost to achieve development goals and offer learning opportunities to people who had conventionally been excluded from such efforts. One of these tools is videoconferencing (VC). Connecting instructors and participants regardless of the distance between them, VC-based e-learning supports the productivity movement by providing increased opportunities for knowledge-sharing agents to change their current situations for the better.

Since 2004, the APO has partnered with the World Bank Tokyo Development Learning Center (TDLC) and introduced VC-based distancelearning courses through the World Bank Global Development Learning Network (GDLN). By 2010, the number of courses delivered to APO member countries

Participants in Africa are connected in a microfinance course – *Photo courtesy of TDLC*

through this VC-based e-learning mode had increased from one to six per year. Subjects covered so far include Total Quality Management, the Toyota Production System, Food Safety Management, Exporting Agrifood Products to Emerging Markets, Green Productivity, and Energy Efficiency. These courses are designed as blended learning courses, making one course four consecutive days in length. For each subject, the same modality is used over three phases to train more participants from 15 to 16 member countries.

Advantages of VC-based distance-learning courses

As a tool for productivity enhancement, the following advantages of VCbased courses should be highlighted: 1) scaling-up of outreach; 2) access to more experts and resources; 3) course design; and 4) greater costeffectiveness.

Expanded outreach
Through the delivery of five courses to 16 countries, VC-based distancelearning courses made it possible to reach out to about 1,500 participants in 2009. It would be almost impossible to do the same if those courses had been conducted in a conventional face-to-face (f2f) training modality. VC sessions can connect multiple countries and provide people with more learning opportunities, without the need for costly travel abroad. In many countries, people who work at the same institutions are able to take part in the courses because of the flexibility of time and the reduced costs of distance learning or e-learning. Many of the APO's GDLN-based distancelearning courses are at the introductory level and thus they are open to an extensive number of eligible participants.

On other occasions, the APO and NPOs select specific target groups of participants. These aspects are well integrated and generate a synergistic effect to expand outreach. It is also important to note that the more people who join from a specific institution, the more chances and opportunities are generated for institutional changes to occur. In this regard, these courses can be considered not only effective for individual training but also for organizational training and learning. It is always difficult for an individual to create change, but with more colleagues who are able to share the same learning experiences and knowledge gained within the same learning environment, the more the rates of change within their institutions can be accelerated.

Access to more experts and resources
VC technology is a powerful tool for reaching out to people in different countries and regions. It allows them to communicate on-screen in real time and attract learning experts for each course. Through ICT, people can access "just-in-time" information, knowledge, and experience from anywhere in the world. VC-based seminars are designed with these advantages, to facilitate cross-regional learning and sharing. By using such technology, audiences in different countries benefit from the resources readily available today.

Course design
Course design is crucial for the APO's e-learning courses due to the content requiring conversion from the f2f to e-learning or distance-learning mode. Thus, in 2004, the TDLC's task manager and instructional designer modified the original design of its Total Quality Management Program by shortening the lecture time to make the course more focused on key topics and added interaction time for question and answer sessions and discussions. This part was designed through the implementation of a three-day VC session. To make the courses more practical as well as to facilitate regional dialogue and knowledge/experience sharing, a field trip and local workshop were also built in the course. These are valuable opportunities for participants to see actual situations firsthand and to understand how the concepts they have learned in the courses can be applied to real situations.

After the local workshop, participants in each country were required to assemble into teams to make presentations. This enabled participants to gain further knowledge on the same concepts or theories applied in different contexts. It created a positive outcome within the course, conducive to high-quality presentations. The APO project officer pointed out that, "Presentations are

excellent and sometimes better than f2f training because a competitive element is introduced." Such a combination of different learning modes is called "blended learning" and has become a prototype for most APO courses implemented to date.

Greater cost-effectiveness
It should be emphasized that the use of distance learning significantly contributes to cost-effectiveness in terms of the number of trainees and days for training per course. The more people participate, the greater the level of cost-effectiveness. It is important to note that in the case of the APO, the quality of courses has been maintained although the cost of training delivery has been reduced. In 2009, about 98% of course participants evaluated the APO's GDLN-based distance-learning courses as "more than expected" or "as expected," which is equivalent to the result from the APO's f2f training courses. This shows that the cost-effectiveness and the quality of courses can be compatible if programs are well designed to meet the specific training objectives.

In the last few years, a Japanese semi-governmental organization has held numerous seminars through VC connections. Overseas embassy attachés and staff of development assistance organizations have been connected with experts in Tokyo in a cumulative total of over 300 countries. "Thanks to technical innovation, discussion among numerous venues abroad has now become possible," its director commented.

Conventional f2f training has great value, and e-learning is irreplaceable and has its own advantages. The VC-based distance-learning method can generate more learning opportunities for people while facilitating information and knowledge sharing on a large scale. The method is effective, efficient, and economical. Thus the combination of f2f and distance learning makes it possible to meet various communication and learning needs. It has already become one of the most powerful tools today to boost productivity and promote development in all parts of the world. There is no better way to bring people together.

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