

# Can Virtual Training Be Better Than The Classroom?



*Finding the Best Format for Observable Practice and Demonstrated Proficiency*

## Overview

When it comes to creating lasting behavior change in salespeople, most sales leaders assume that virtual sales skills training is just a pale imitation of the in-person classroom. 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

- Reduce up to 50 percent of the cost of your training program by cutting your related travel, classroom, and opportunity cost—without having to cut training itself.
- Avoid the biggest challenge your leaders have—TOOF (time out of field)—by delivering training that’s in line with the workflow of your participants.
- Continue training through tough economic times, like when you have a travel freeze but strategically need training to improve business performance.

### Effectiveness Benefits

- **Agility**—Provide just-in-time training instead of just-in-case training. Quickly stand up situational training programs to meet your acute strategic needs. Training programs could be packaged and delivered online precisely when you need them most.

- **Flexibility**—Deliver bespoke training instead of a one-size-fits all approach. You could identify your key performance indicators, such as lagging pipeline, declining close rates, excessive discounting, or lower renewals, by individuals or team, and 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 program rollouts in weeks vs months (or years) across your remote salesforce, including multi-lingual, global initiatives. Increase your speed to productivity and success, compared to the plodding roadshow of visiting every location.

It’s not just wishful thinking. In this State of the Conversation Report, we explore a virtual training model that’s proven to be more effective than an in-person classroom at creating behavior change, ensuring message accountability, and making sure your salespeople feel confident in the sales concepts and skills they need to be successful.



## Do Sales Leaders Believe in Virtual Training?

The modern B2B salesperson is in a training dilemma. On one hand, they need more skills training. But they're also facing a counter-pressure—a growing reluctance among sales managers to take reps out of the field for training.

A Corporate Visions industry survey found that:

- **Nearly four out of five companies (79 percent) believe they're not training the right number of salespeople on the skills they need each year.**
- **Fully 56 percent of the organizations struggling with this challenge say the top reason is *pressure not to lose time out of the field.***

Enter virtual training. No wonder **65 percent of companies plan to increase investment in virtual training formats**, while investment in traditional, classroom-based training is set to remain flat.

There's just one problem: **only 10 percent of companies believe virtual training is as good as live, instructor-led classroom events** when it comes to behavior change.

*This begs the question: Why invest in virtual training if you don't believe it's as effective?*

It seems that leaders are willing to plug 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.

# The Field Test: Online Training vs. Classroom Training

Companies are buying in to the cost benefits of virtual training, but until now, there's been very little evidence that sales skills can be trained as effectively online as in person.

In a controlled field test with a Fortune 250 software client, we compared the effectiveness of online training versus live classroom training. The study 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

The field test used comparable sales teams, in the same market segment, over the same period of time, and exposed them to the exact same training content. *The only difference was whether the training was delivered live or in a recorded online environment.*

After they completed the training, data scientists tracked each groups' sales performance results in terms of building pipeline and the annual contract value of their deals.

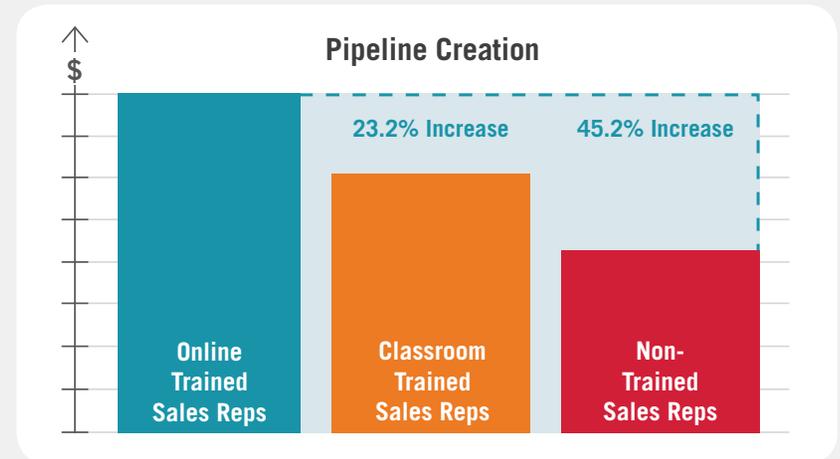
Turns out, online training can, in fact, unleash all the powerful, positive benefits imagined earlier in this eBook. Sales teams who completed the online training delivered **23.2 percent more pipeline** than similar teams who received live classroom training.

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

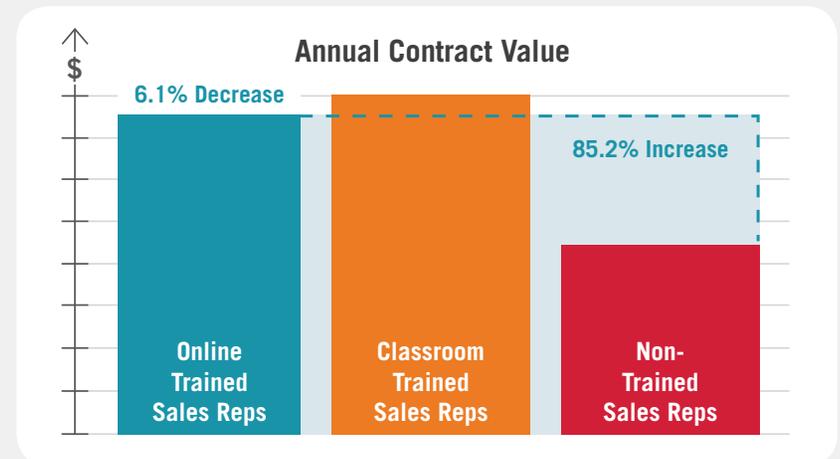
These results finally make it clear that you can get material improvement using online training. And according to the Fortune 250 company conducting the test, they considered the 6.1 percent difference to be "close enough" to convince them they can scale programs more efficiently and effectively using online as a proven alternative to live, classroom training.

## Sales teams who completed the online training delivered:

- **45.2% more pipeline** than similar teams *who didn't get CVI Training during the same time period*
- **23.2% more pipeline** than similar teams *who went through CVI live workshops during the same period*



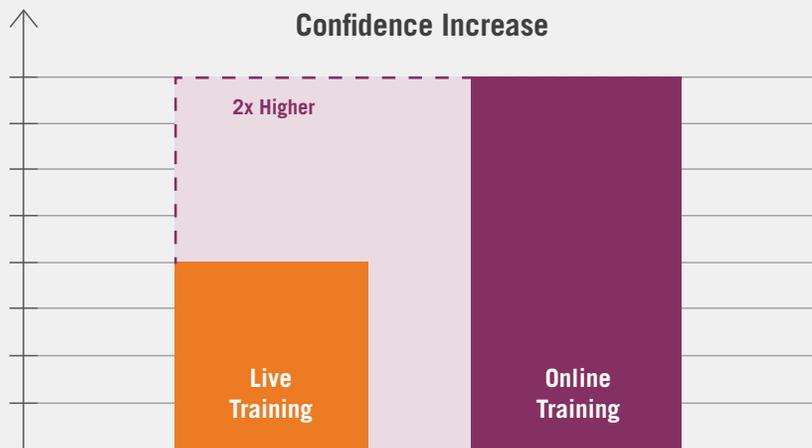
- **85.2% higher ACV** than similar teams *who didn't get CVI training during the same time period*
- **Only 6.1% lower ACV** than similar teams *who went through CVI live workshops during the same time period*



# Building Confidence and Proficiency

Confidence a key qualitative indicator of how your salespeople engage with the training. When they're actively engaged, they walk away with both newly learned skills and the confidence to immediately apply those skills in the field.

**Sales reps who completed online training experienced twice the boost in confidence levels when engaging executive decision-makers, compared with those who attended live classroom training.** Specifically, the questions we asked related to their confidence in conducting a selling conversation with an executive decision-maker.



Why such a drastic improvement? The self-paced, flexible, and highly individualized experience in an online training environment is simply not possible in a group classroom setting. But why does this method of online training work so effectively?

On the following pages, we explore how you can get the maximum benefits from your virtual training program.



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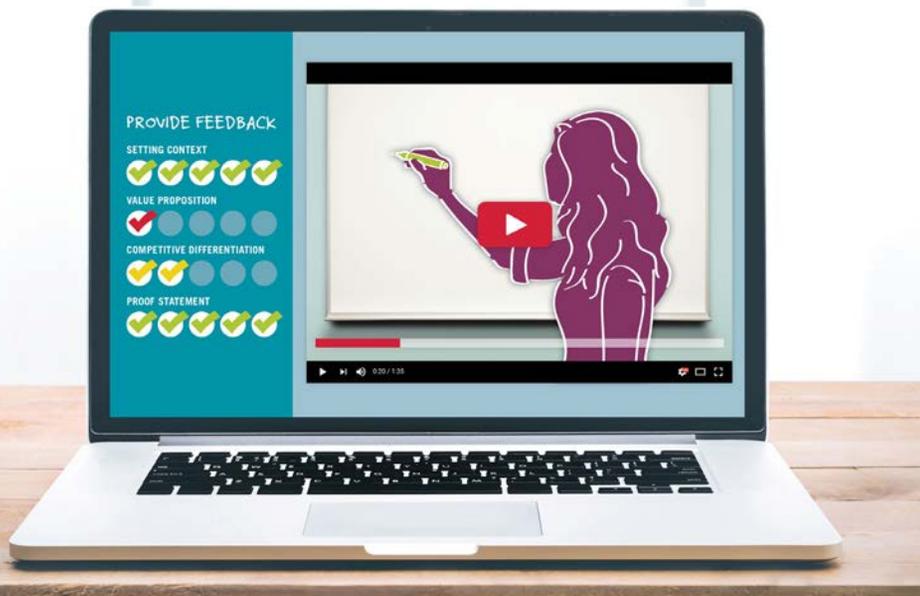
## Rethinking The Pace of Learning

The strength of live classroom-based events, whether virtual or in person, 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 behavior change and skills acquisition are at stake, those 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?

An online training model reimagines the traditional training cycle of high-intensity, time-crunched learning, followed by gradual skills erosion. This approach instead 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. Reps acquire knowledge, then demonstrate that knowledge by submitting recorded video and written challenges that receive individual coaching. By altering the breakneck pace of classroom learning, reps benefit from an environment that's more flexible, thorough, and sustained.



## 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 your 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 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 multi-tasking on their day-to-day apps until they're called on to present. Research shows that 70 percent 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 the practice/coaching time everyone believes is necessary for creating behavior 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.

Despite these fundamental limitations, many sales leaders are still clinging to the idea that a live classroom is the best form of virtual training.

# Picking a Path for Virtual Training

In a recent industry survey, more than 200 sales leaders were asked to consider two distinct approaches to virtual training:



## VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

A live online training, practice, and coaching event using web conferencing or telepresence-type technology, taking place during a set timeframe. 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. These are typically short, two-hour events where participants take turns applying knowledge in practice examples and receiving live feedback from the facilitator.



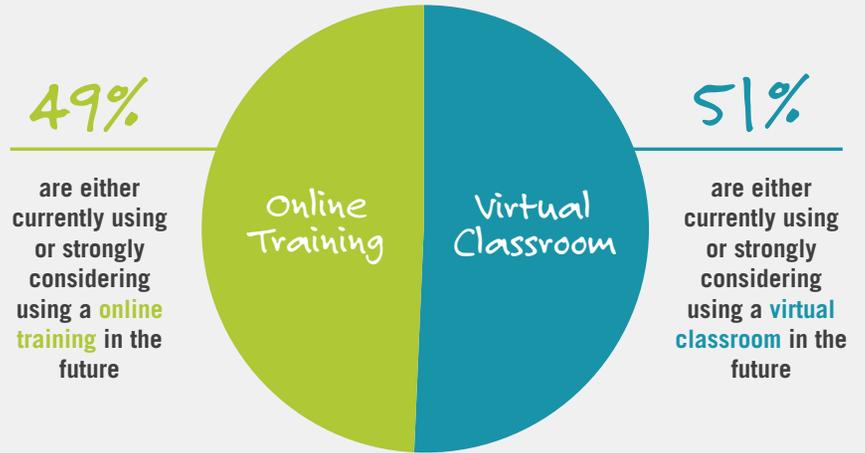
## ONLINE TRAINING

Observable practice and coaching in an online, recorded environment. Salespeople participate in e-learning for knowledge transfer and perform recorded assignments on their schedule. They receive coaching feedback (red/yellow/green scoring across multiple variables) and get tailored recommendations for improvement. Participants may need to fulfill requirements to resubmit for pass/fail determination and are pushed tailored follow-up training videos based on identified weak spots.

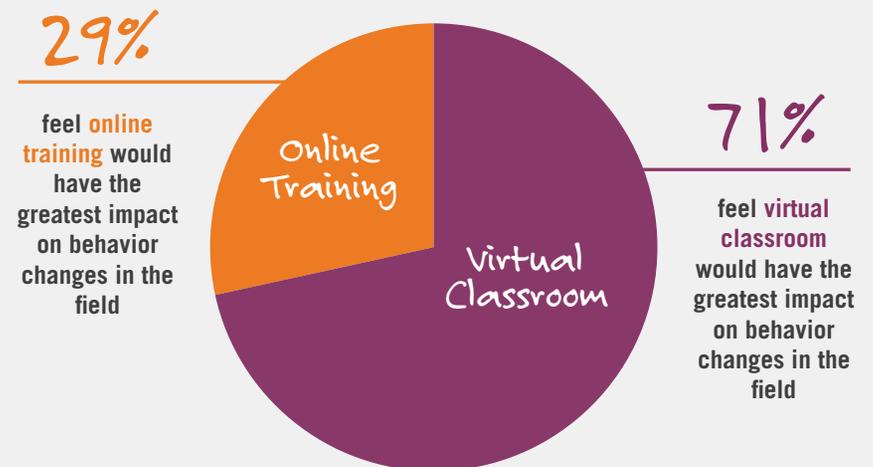
When asked which approach their company is currently using, or considering using in the future as they look to incorporate virtual training, respondents were essentially split down the middle. Nearly **51 percent** indicated virtual classroom, while **49 percent** indicated an online training experience.

**Because the virtual classroom is a version of something familiar, it tends to be seen as the most sensible alternative.** But how do these notions stack up against the tangible outcomes that leaders want to see?

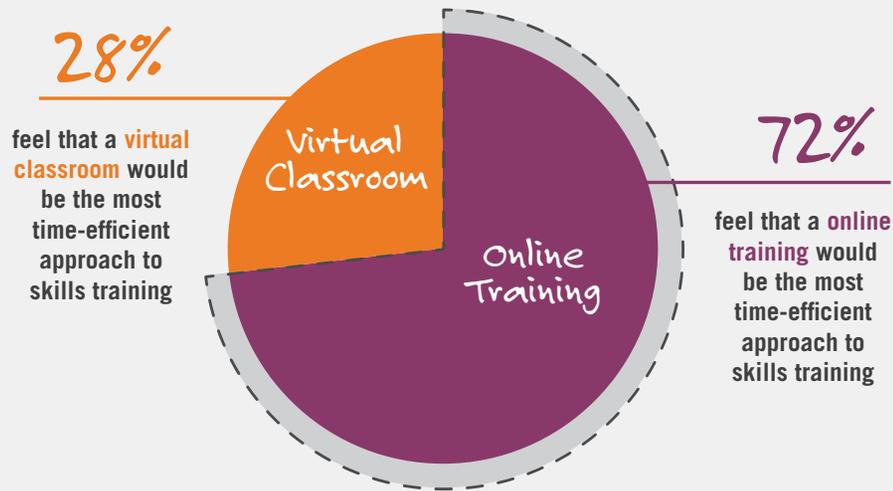
Which of the approaches below are you currently using, or most strongly considering using in the future, as you incorporate virtual training into your learning and training plans?



Which of the approaches below do you feel would have the greatest impact on behavior changes in the field?



Which of the approaches below do you feel would be the most time-efficient approach to skills training?



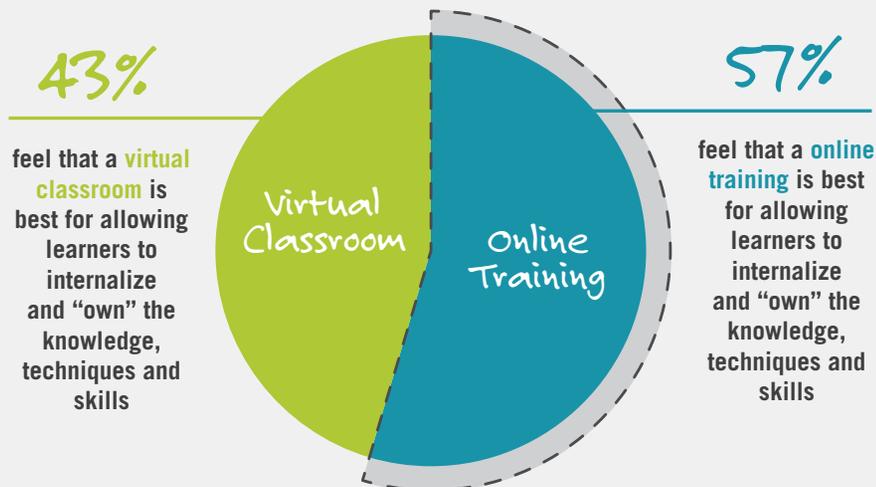
## What Matters Most in a Virtual Training Environment?

Here's how respondents stack-ranked the importance of six considerations germane to virtual training environments.

1. Ability of salespeople to learn and train on their own time
2. Amount of time a salesperson actually gets to practice
3. Ability to see peers' best practice examples
4. Depth and customization of feedback
5. Ability to watch others practice and see the feedback they receive
6. Ability to grade (either pass/fail, or red/yellow/green)

Interestingly, the two areas that matter most to respondents are both areas in which respondents view the online training environment as superior to the live virtual classroom.

Which of the approaches below do you feel is best at allowing learners to internalize and "own" the knowledge, techniques and skills you want them to acquire?



**Scheduling flexibility, practice time, and the ability to see peers' best practice examples are the three most important considerations when it comes to a virtual training environment.**

So why exactly does online training work so much better than the classroom? That's covered on the following page.

## A Better Approach to Online

The ultimate goal of sales skills training is behavior change. To that end, there's no substitute for observable practice time and demonstrated proficiency.

The emerging online environment shifts away from the classroom setup and its inherent limitations to place a heavier emphasis on the practice and coaching components—both so essential to instilling behavior change.

In this respect, the online training model significantly improves on the “holy grail” of the live, in-person classroom by overcoming its limitations.

### HERE'S HOW ONLINE TRAINING WORKS:

- 1. Participate in e-learning for knowledge transfer.** This includes viewing online modules containing learning principles to communicate critical concepts and skills through interaction and examples.
- 2. Perform recorded practice assignments.** Have reps record role-plays or web conferences with prospects to practice the concepts and skills they learned.
- 3. Have assignments reviewed by an expert coach or consultant,** who provides detailed scoring against a performance-based rubric, along with detailed notes on strengths and weaknesses.
- 4. Provide individually tailored feedback.** Push short, tailored coaching videos as remediation based on the identified weaknesses.
- 5. Optionally require re-submission** until the recording reaches a demonstrated level of proficiency.
- 6. Repeat this process** on an ongoing, scheduled basis with different challenges or exercises.



**Tim Riesterer**

Chief Strategy &  
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## Time Is of the Essence

Time-based constraints are the main flaw of all forms of classroom-based training—time out of the field, limited to no time to practice, and rushed time to get specific coaching and feedback. Not only does the virtual classroom not fix the time-based issues of the in-person classroom, it might actually aggravate them!

What's making matters worse? Since reps don't have to travel anywhere, it's very easy to simply not show up, or to use other apps and go about your day until you have to present. We've seen virtual classrooms where over 70 percent of attendees have a different app open on top of the classroom app (little do they know this can be tracked by the facilitator!).

Other issues with virtual classrooms: Where you might get two days in a traditional classroom, you might get two hours in a virtual one. That means an event that's even more compressed, that disappears even faster, and that offers even fewer opportunities to perform, get coaching, and watch your peers—all of which is further undermined if you're just working through emails anyway.



# The Online Training Advantage

The online training environment is a paradigm shift away from the restrictions inherent to the live classroom model.

Here's where the format sets itself apart:

VIRTUAL CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT	ONLINE TRAINING ENVIRONMENT
 <b>Pre-approved times</b>	 <b>No assigned times</b> or places reps need to be. Reps learn, practice, and receive coaching when it fits their schedule, without taking them away from their day job.
 <b>Insufficient practice time</b>	 <b>Everyone does a complete stand-and-deliver presentation</b> , instead of doing a partial or incomplete presentation, or even getting to skip their presentation as they might in a classroom.
 <b>Weak assessment structure</b>	 <b>Expert scoring and assessment.</b> A coaching expert reviews the content and scores it against a rubric based on the skills taught and expectations set for demonstrated proficiency.
 <b>Lacks specific tailored coaching and reinforcement</b>	 <b>Get detailed coaching feedback and tailored remediation.</b> Beyond just red/yellow/green scoring, your rep gets custom, complete coaching notes identifying specific strengths and weaknesses, along with a pushed set of emails and short remediation videos for improvement in their specific areas of weakness.
 <b>No ongoing certification process</b>	 <b>Opportunities for certification.</b> When you really need reps to demonstrate proficiency on a skill, product, or new message, you can ask for re-submissions until certification-worthy levels are reached.
 <b>Potential exposure to subpar practice examples</b>	 <b>Watch peers' best work.</b> Unlike a classroom where you have to sit through some potentially bad examples, in this environment you can push the "five-star" examples for reps to review.

# The Power of Virtual Finally Realized

## Noteworthy advantages of online training:



**Multi-Touch, Spaced Learning**—In an era where self-pacing, flexibility, and individualized learning are increasingly favored, the time-bound virtual classroom environment struggles to deliver. Learning in an online recorded environment is self-paced and flexible, so reps can gradually acquire and retain critical skills. Best of all, this model doesn't interfere with their day-to-day workflow.



**More Practice**—One of the most profound factors in creating behavior change and instilling deep skills knowledge comes from the opportunity to practice in a stand-and-deliver environment. In an online environment, analysis shows that salespeople typically practice six times before submitting their assignment. 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 in-person 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.

These needs speak to the demand for coaching that a) provides timing flexibility, b) ensures reps demonstrate proficiency and c) provides continuous reinforcement. After all, when you really need salespeople to demonstrate proficiency on a skill, a new product, or a new message, a single event that occurred three months in the past or is set for three months in the future won't do them much good.

## Conclusion

Observable practice, detailed coaching, and demonstrated proficiency are absolute musts for behavior change.

Online training 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: fluency, command, and ownership of the message.

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 then receive coaching feedback 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.

With a flexible, online environment, you provide your team with training that works inline 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 organization. And, you can now feel confident knowing you're going to deliver the same or better results as an in-person classroom.

**Recorded online training may seem like a radical break from the event-based classroom model that has been the standard for decades. But it's actually a doubling down on what sales training has always been about: fluency, command, and ownership of the message.**



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## Proficiency Through Practice

As a company that delivers training across all modalities, including in-person and online, Corporate Visions doesn't have any particular axe to grind. What we do have is an interest in determining the most efficient and effective training format for driving behavior change.

The importance of observable practice and demonstrated proficiency on behavior change can't be overstated. This is where the online environment comes through in a big way. Every salesperson is accountable for their individual performance. When a rep's skills are being judged by a set of expert eyes, there's nowhere to hide. That's why the average learner completes six practice runs before hitting the submit button.

You also guarantee your salespeople know what good looks like because they're shown examples of criteria-based top performances. Reps don't sit through a litany of in-person "hit or miss" attempts; they know exactly which examples represent the gold standard and what makes them great.

## About Corporate Visions

Corporate Visions is a leading marketing and sales messaging, content, and skills training company. Global B2B companies come to us when they want to:

- **Create Value™**: Break the status quo and differentiate your solutions from competitors
- **Elevate Value™**: Build a more effective business case to justify executive decisions
- **Capture Value™**: Maximize the profitability of each deal
- **Expand Value™**: Renew and expand existing customer revenue



[corporatevisions.com](http://corporatevisions.com)



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**Tim Riesterer is Chief Strategy & Research Officer at Corporate Visions.** In that role, he sets the direction and develops products for the company. His books, **Conversations That Win the Complex Sale** and **The Three Value Conversations**, focus on improving market-ready messages, content and skills that marketers and salespeople can use to win more deals.



Nicci Nesmith Hammerel  

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**Eric Beckman is Senior Vice President of Products for Corporate Visions.** Eric is a recognized learning leader and creator of curriculums now used by sales professionals in over 60 countries and adopted by nearly half of the B2B Fortune 100. A longtime CPA, he's a member of the AICPA and serves on several boards.