

It's Not Just the “What”, It's the “How”: Methods Make the Difference

As a trainer, you've probably had a few sessions fall flat— even a session with content that's interesting or really useful to participants can sometimes be a dud. And then there are the times you get raves, even when you thought no one would be impressed. So, why is some training more engaging than others? It might have something to do with the training method, not just the content.

We surveyed 5,034 recent training participants to see which training methods had the greatest impact on their enjoyment of training programs. Why enjoyment? Because when training is enjoyable, people learn without realizing it. They are more likely to have positive associations with the materials they've experienced and they're more likely to actually *use* what they've learned. And when training is enjoyable, participants are more engaged and less likely to zone out. This is all important. But more important, in our study participants who said they enjoyed their training were much more likely to say that the training made them better at their job. They also were much more likely to say the training was a good use of their time and to recommend it to a friend. Based on our data, we want to share with you three methods that had a surprisingly large influence on participant enjoyment: small groups, role play, and PowerPoint®.

Small Groups

By far, the method that made the biggest difference on a participant's enjoyment of training was small-group discussion. As trainers, you probably see the benefit of allowing participants to process information with other people. It's a great way for people to integrate information and make it their own. But it also had a bigger impact on participant enjoyment than any other variable we researched. In our study, the inclusion of small-group discussion increased participant enjoyment by 35% (compared to training without small-group discussion).

Small group discussion allows people to be active and socialize. It also lets them share their stories, opinions and knowledge. We expect people who are outgoing and enthusiastic to enjoy small group discussions (and they do), but surprisingly we found even those people who describe themselves as reserved and analytical enjoy training more when it includes small group discussions. More surprising was even though small group discussion is a common training method, only 43% of those surveyed said it was included in their last training experience.

Role Play

Many trainers recognize that role plays make training more effective. Role plays allow participants to practice a skill that they've learned and to get immediate feedback on it. Role play takes abstract knowledge and makes it concrete. So why did less than a quarter (23%) of our survey participants say role play was part of their last training experience? It might be the fear factor.

We've all seen people roll their eyes at the suggestion of role play. Because of this, many of us might be reluctant to include role play because we think people don't like it. In our study, however, we found the opposite to be true. The presence of role plays increased participant enjoyment by 25%. This is equal to the inclusion of games — and most of us assume that games make training more fun. Based on our data, however, role plays appear to have a significantly bigger impact on the effectiveness of training.

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And while it's true that people who described themselves as playful and lively enjoyed role plays the most, even people who think of themselves as private and unexpressive found training with role plays more enjoyable than training that didn't include it. When designing your next training, see if there are opportunities to add role play. Your participants might thank you.

PowerPoint®

In the training world, many people are moving away from PowerPoint. Some completely abstain while others are occasional users. The biggest critics say that PowerPoint is the death of training. It appears, however, that no one asked the learners what they thought. In our study, the inclusion of PowerPoint presentations increased learner enjoyment by 25%.

PowerPoint makes it easier for people to follow along. It also keeps people focused, employing a message or image that relates to the topic. If minds do wander, PowerPoint is a reminder to get back in the game. And for visual learners, seeing a representation of information is key to their understanding. So while much maligned and at times overused, PowerPoint should not be summarily dismissed — at least from the learner's perspective.

Conclusion

So, what does this mean to you? It means that training that is enjoyable increases the likelihood that participants will use the information and that the training will be seen as worthwhile. It also means the opportunity for creating more enjoyable training is within your reach, by remembering to include simple, tried-and-true methods like small-group discussion, role plays, and PowerPoint presentations.

Next month in Everything DiSC® Pulse, we'll reveal what learners really think about e-learning.

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