

Introduction

As with many companies, learning is one of our most significant employee investments. Successful programs not only build critical skills and support professional development, but also reinforce employee engagement, community and retention.

In 2019 we launched a global initiative called LearnFest in all of our major offices globally, carving out three weeks per year to focus on learning and development. With tracks for managers and professionals, this was a great way for us to codify and scale our learning efforts, while also protecting collective time to move hundreds of employees through core curriculum. When COVID-19 hit in March, our mostly in-person learning model, with elaborate, hands-on classroom activities and social events was no longer an option. With less than two months until LearnFest, we had to completely rethink how to deliver a scalable and engaging learning model in a fully virtual environment.



Challenge

We needed to design a completely virtual LearnFest model along with an entirely different learning approach to make it successful. We had to take the best of our learning practices and experiential learning techniques and determine how best to execute them in a fully virtual environment. We also had to quickly learn how to leverage the virtual capabilities of our existing platform (Zoom) while optimizing learning design principles and engagement to make this work.

Approach

To achieve this, we narrowed our focus to redesign existing curriculum into high-impact, micro-learning modules optimized for a remote, virtual environment. Several factors had to be considered to ensure we hit the mark.

1.

Content Design

Many of our core manager courses were day-long classroom sessions with lots of hands-on activities built in. Research from the Neuroleadership Institute indicates that virtual learners benefit from micro-learning moments spread over a longer period of time to improve content “digestion,” reflection and personal commitments. This methodology was reflected in our redesign as classes were either shortened or spread over multiple days to minimize learner fatigue and improve engagement and retention. No session is longer than three hours.

2.

Session Delivery

With an in-person training model, facilitators are the focal point as they present content paired with activities (70% presentation/ 30% activities). In a virtual environment the ownership becomes more decentralized and shared with learners (50% presentation/ 50% activities). Fewer concepts are taught and more time is built around polls, breakout discussions and self-discovery to amplify the learning experience with group chats throughout. Post session, we continue to reinforce a community mindset by encouraging peer accountability ‘buddies’ to help with challenges and new learnings. We encourage buddies to set up coffee chats to discuss insights and experiences post-session.

3.

Technical Capabilities

The new session design fully leverages all of Zoom’s features including breakout rooms, polls, annotations, white board, filters and spotlights. Event producer is a new role that emerged for us to ensure that the technology is optimized for participation during virtual sessions alongside the facilitator. This includes things like monitoring participant experience, Zoom feature enablement, breakout room deployment, and managing ongoing chat discussions to amplify key points and takeaways. BoxNotes are used for team collaboration and brainstorming activities along with digital participant guides for note taking.

4.

Embracing the “new normal”

The biggest shift from the classroom to fully virtual is managing the environment. To support engagement and connection remotely, we’re now more prescriptive with expectations. For example, we explicitly ask participants to have cameras on during the session to reinforce connection with tips like turning off self-view to minimize fatigue. We establish team norms like acknowledging in the chat when you need to step away to mirror an in-person experience of stepping out of the classroom. At the same time, we fully embrace the realities of working from home by making it okay for participants to step away and handle an issue or warmly welcoming children and the occasional pet who may occasionally pop into the session.



Learning

We have now run two full cycles of LearnFest in all regions virtually with over 1700 participants worldwide. Our session scores have jumped from an average of 4.1/5 pre-virtual to 4.4/5. Initial participant feedback showed surprise at how positive the virtual experience was for them. We received overwhelmingly positive feedback on the expanded use of Zoom because it allowed for more connection and deeper learning. Creating space for peer learning and connection has been even more important during this time of being physically disconnected, a strength of our program design that we’re leaning into even more now. An additional benefit of going virtual is saving 30 hours of session setup time and over \$10K in travel and material costs.

With two completed cycles, we are continuing to learn ways to optimize the experience. For example, we’re still refining the group breakout model to find the ideal group size and set-up to engage all participants. We’ve also learned that regularly changing the breakout groups allows attendees to mix up their interactions and gain new perspectives. Time management becomes increasingly important with shorter sessions, which requires change management for facilitators who may be used to having more flex time.

Conclusion

2020 offered us an incredible opportunity to rethink how we deliver live training at Box. While we’ve always had remote employees, moving to a 100% virtual environment pushed our thinking and approach into a scalable solution that will ensure that everyone has access to high-quality learning experiences going forward. As the saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention. We’re very grateful that this season of learning has helped us to expand our reach and impact into the future.

Quotes



The class was, “extremely well done on zoom / virtual, the breakout sessions were seamless, and I enjoyed having it be virtual!”

Course: Make Mom Proud | Score: 4.6/5



It was nice to be grouped with folks at Box not in sales or in central location to get diverse perspectives from colleagues, especially in this virtual world we live in”

Course: Overcoming Bias for Professionals | Score: 4.3/5

Photo:
Accelerate Program for Managers- Graduation

