



TRAINING

ONE YEAR ON
REFLECTIONS | PART 2



REFLECTIONS FROM OUR ASSOCIATES

In the second of this two-part series, Dods Training Associates, Katie Driver and Katharina Roelofsz, share their thoughts on adapting to online training during the pandemic and their virtual learning plans looking ahead.

Katie Driver, Policy Trainer

Looking back to March 2020, I see that the last time I travelled inter-city was to go to Cardiff to deliver two days of face-to-face policy training for the Welsh government. And in my diary for this week are two half days of virtual policy training for the Welsh government.

These events neatly bookend a year like no other and offer a useful lens to consider how that year has passed. In the first lockdown, our civil service colleagues swung into an impressive crisis management mode, devising and delivering government initiatives to help us all cope with the pandemic

whilst at the same time learning to work virtually. At Dods, we rapidly turned virtual too.

I spent much of April re-working Civil Service Learning course deliveries so they could be delivered remotely, and the summer months involved new virtual policy training for MoJ and the Home Office.

In the autumn, the Welsh government were ready for a further round of policy training so we designed a fresh suite of courses to be delivered virtually to help civil servants rise to the challenge of post-pandemic policy work.

Throughout, I've also delivered policy Action Learning Sets for a range of Dods clients, switching from face to face to virtual – a route we knew worked thanks to our earlier international deliveries.

Online training has brought some clear advantages. It's opened up extra ways to interact with delegates, for example by running quick quizzes and prompting chatbox discussion. And delegates have increasingly shared their own resources and links with each other, with some really seeming to prefer the ability to type rather than talk.

It's also forced me to think hard about what material to include and how to get it across in an engaging way – I think our courses are now even better as a result!

That said, I do miss being able to feel the mood of the training room, to spot the fleeting signs which might suggest I need to reiterate or rephrase something or take a diversion into richer material which might add extra value.

To keep up with all this, I've become a dab hand at PowerPoint, Microsoft Whiteboard, and a range of online platforms. I know far more about wifi and hotspots than I ever did before, and I have a range of strategies to pull out of the bag if my delegates have difficulties connecting.

That said, I am looking forward to a time when we can deliver a blend of face-to-face and virtual training. I think there's important social capital and an additional layer of rich discussion that develops when delegates are in a real room together. But equally, I'm sure that the ease and effectiveness of short bursts of online learning mean there'll be a virtual component to most of our future offerings.





REFLECTIONS FROM OUR ASSOCIATES

Katharina Roelofs, Dods Training Associate

A year ago I couldn't envision delivering online training and workshops. The immediate future for Dods workshops and training looked incredibly uncertain. But one of my more forward thinking clients, MoJ, was keen to trial virtual deliveries as early as April 2020.

I always relish opportunities to learn new skills and I enjoyed the challenge that MoJ had set. Every delivery became an opportunity to learn and perfect this new skill. It didn't take long for virtual deliveries to be filled with the same level of energy and engagements as face-to-face ones.

It also opened new opportunities to grow business accounts and to better adapt to client needs. Sometimes we need to be challenged to make improvements that we hadn't even realised could be made.

I believe reassessing the work we do has made us even better at it, and this will stay with us long term whether we continue to work virtually or move back to face-to-face deliveries





Notable Dods Training deliveries

The past 12 months forced us and our clients to think outside the box. This led to new opportunities with clients that may not have existed otherwise.

Dstl, for example, were keen to develop workshops that had more of a “*festival*” feel than traditional full-day training sessions.

During planning sessions with the client, I was able to identify communications skills that would improve the way they communicate the excellent work they do with their own stakeholders and customers.

Working virtually created opportunities that had not existed before due to the need to book trainers for full days and cover travel expenses.

Therefore I was able to develop short but very targeted 90-minute interactive sessions which focussed on specific areas that would make a tangible difference to the way Dstl communicate.

Dstl were so happy with these sessions that they are due to continue long term until at least October in addition to full-day training sessions that we are developing for them.



Thoughts about online training (and what I like about it)

Online training and workshops have huge benefits for both Dods Associates and clients. Clients can now invite staff from regional offices all over the country to take part, creating development opportunities for many staff that may not have been possible otherwise.

Interaction with delegates can also be increased online compared to during face-to-face deliveries. Several clients, such as DWP, have also commented on this benefit. During face-to-face deliveries we tend to have one or two very vocal participants that dominate the discussions.

Using a combination of the chat box and people unmuting themselves to speak allows delegates who might feel too shy, or who might want to reflect on the questions before answering to get involved. This allows the trainer to engage with delegates in ways that they are most comfortable with and therefore increase active participation.

Personally, I hugely enjoy virtual deliveries. Eliminating the unpleasant stresses that accompany the daily commute, fighting for a place on an overcrowded tube, have a huge benefit. As does cutting the greenhouse gas emissions caused by travelling.





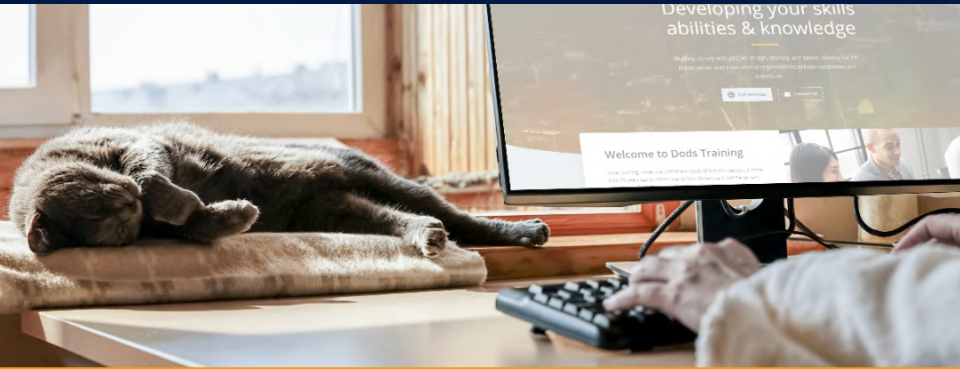
It has also created opportunities for me personally that would not have existed otherwise whilst also improving my work-life balance. I have been able to work with clients in the UK and abroad which would not have been possible for me as a mother with a young child.

Working outside of London is not an option due to childcare and I now get to spend valuable time with my son and enjoy those moments that would have been missed while stuck on the tube.

The flexibility that online training creates both for those of trainers delivering the sessions and for attendees has created a level playing field and opportunities for everyone, regardless of age, gender, caring responsibilities, or any other factors.

Working from home is a huge privilege that not everyone has. I for one am extremely grateful that online training has allowed me to enjoy the many benefits that come from working from home.





How you've built skills and adapted

It is far too easy to get stuck in doing things a certain way because it's always been done that way. This past year brought far too many challenges but also great opportunities to learn new skills and adapt the way we work.

Being forced to rethink and redesign existing courses, means we have been able to go back to the basics of what the client wants to achieve and make them even more effective than they were before.

Moving across to virtual deliveries has meant changing content, slide presentation and our own style of delivery. Before March 2020 many of us had never done a virtual presentation. Presenting online can be very different to presenting in person.

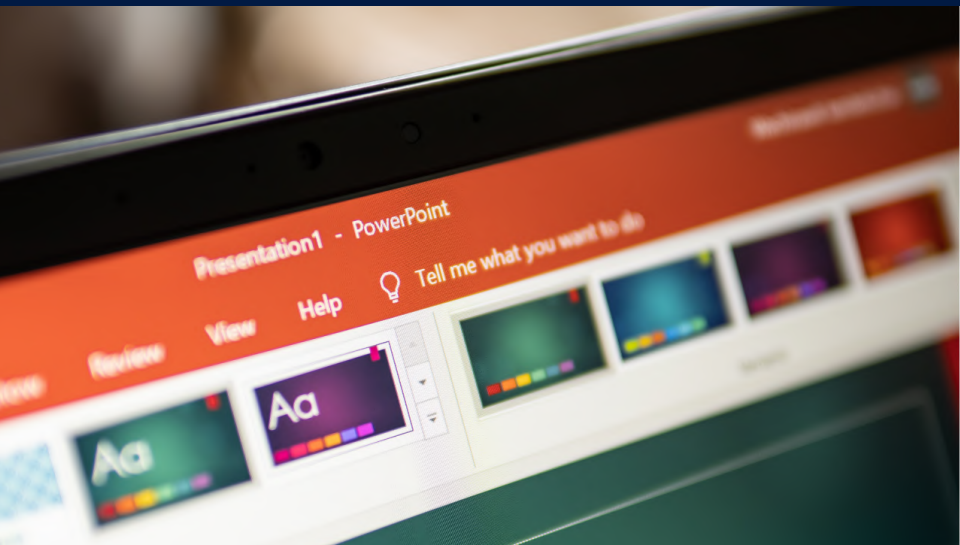
Many presenters complain that they can't see their audience. But that's distracting from the main issue - which is that the audience needs to connect with you rather than the other way around.

It's harder to keep your audience engaged and distraction-free, especially if they are online.

You have to compete with various external distractions they may have such as doorbells ringing, emails coming through, cats trying to climb over the desk, and children homeschooling.

It is therefore easier for the audience to switch off and disengage online.





Presenting virtually is a performance as much as it is about the content. The content is easy - I have 14 years of working in government communications to draw upon to create that. But for the delivery of that content we need to set the bar even higher virtually compared to face-to-face.

Slides are also used and viewed differently online compared to face-to-face. Just like many of the best Ted Talk speakers never use slides, I prefer not to use slides face-to-face as they are rarely a helpful communications tool.

But online, new slides appearing on the screen periodically will bring wandering minds back to you and your message.

Slides are viewed on a small computer or mobile device rather than on a large conference room screen. Therefore, something that looked uncluttered on a big screen does not look right on a small screen.

But at the same time, my audience is sitting closer to the screen so can see more detail. Therefore, everything from the size of the font, to the placement of images needs to be adapted.

I also greatly enjoyed learning to use my voice, tempo and energy differently to keep audiences engaged. Under the cover of invisibility, online audiences can be a very passive lot!

As a result, presenters have a tendency to go into long monologues that only further discourage participation and encourage tune-out.

One of the most useful things I learnt was to make friends with the pause. It can be a great tool for giving my audience a chance to process what I have said, ask a question, or make a comment.

After all, it can take time for people to type in the chatbox so I have learnt to give them time to do so.

Working on improving my own presentation style will make me a better presenter long term even when we do revert to some face-to-face deliveries in the future.

It has also built my confidence and therefore enabled me to relax and make jokes when those pesky technical issues did arise!





What the future of online training might look like (will we go back to face-to-face?)

I believe there will always be a place for some online training. Many deliveries will revert to face-to-face. But there will remain a space for some of the shorter, bite-size sessions online.

And there may be an opportunity to combine the two: an online, interactive introduction followed by face-to-face practice sessions.

This would enable greater learning outcomes for delegates who have time to absorb the information between the online and face-to-face sessions.

Some organisations will also want to continue with online training so that sessions can be delivered to staff across the country, or to staff that will continue to work from home a few days a week long term. I do not believe the workplace will full return to pre-lockdown practices.

The benefits to both organisations and staff to be more flexible will hopefully remain for a long time to come.

But I also look forward to meeting new people face-to-face again one day!

**Contact the Dods Training
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