

*Attention in Digital Training Events:
A Conceptual Approach to Increase and Sustain Attention List of Abbreviations*

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Abstract

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, digital training events faced the issue that their sessions were no longer take place in physically present. Consequently, participants showed a lower attention span during digital training events. Distractions from social media and smartphones are significantly greater in the digital space respectively at home. Due to the evolution into a more and more digital world, the question was addressed: Which success factors for digital training event design lead to high participant attentiveness? Which conceptual key elements, methodologies, and didactic concepts are required for training event design to reach a high and long attention span of participants? This article offers academic and business-relevant added value. That analysis was conducted with 6 structured expert interviews from the fields of digital event management and adult education. It shows that especially the attention span of participants is an essential factor to understand and retain learning content. In particular, the moderator of the event is responsible for structuring the organization of the event, its methods and its participants in a way that attention is on a high level. Not only the technical skills also the handling and attitude towards digital media are crucial for the success of a digital training event and has already been shown in other studies. Diversified stimuli help to enhance the attention of the participants. In addition, interaction with focused and surprising forms of presentation, enhances the attention of the participants. This aspect has already been confirmed in other studies. This paper shows the measures that lead to an improvement of attention in the digital space are presented beyond the previous studies.

Keywords: Attention, Digital Training, Implications

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Introduction

This work deals with participant's attentiveness during digital training events, especially with success factors in training design and structure. Based on the theoretical framework of these topics, the aim is to create conceptual implications for training event organizers regarding the structure, didactics, and design of training in order to enhance and sustain attention.

The following chapter is intended as an introduction to the work, starting with the problem statement. On this basis, the paper's objective and the research questions are derived, followed by an outline of the applied methodology and the thesis structure.

Problem Statement

Training events are a standard tool to educate and develop technical competencies or soft skills, promote behavior, and transfer knowledge in schools, universities, companies, and academies (Brexendorf et al., 2012). In sales and marketing, training events are tools for educating customers on the appropriate application, sales, or maintenance of products and services (Dombrowski et al., 2020). As a reaction to the global spread of COVID-19, which was declared a pandemic disease in March 2020 by the World Health Organization, most countries introduced various public restrictions. The safety measures include a ban on gatherings, events, trainings, and meetings (Bundesregierung, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020). Hence, event and training organizers were restricted in realizing their events. Furthermore, the number of people working remotely from home grew through the government's contact restrictions from 39% to 61% (Timm, 2020). Thus, the whole work- and communication culture, as well as structure, changed due to these regulations (Timm, 2020).

Digital substitutions replaced face-to-face trainings even during the ban. Online webinars and online trainings are widespread replacement measures for live meetings and events (Fischer, 2020). On the one hand, these kinds of digital alternatives help to reach the initial goals and strengthen a company's overall image. Digital training events are a more sustainable and environment-friendly solution than classical live training (Vogel & Thomas, 2020). Furthermore, online availability prevents less relevant travel activities and positively influences the participant's time resource management. The location-independent availability also increases the overall reach of trainings and results in an increased number of participants (Myriam, 2018). In addition, digitization and the megatrend of connectivity are driving the development of digital communication formats (Dams, 2013). They are not only changing communication, the target group of trainings and events is also developing. The digital natives¹ are now adults, and some are already in professional life as relevant target groups. They are fully-fledged consumers and must be included as a target group. Hence, organizers of trainings must adapt to their needs and expectations (Dams, 2013). However, on the other hand, in practice, the immediate need for digitization caused that in many cases, face-to-face events are transferred identically to a digital versions. With the result that the objectives and contents of the events are not successfully communicated to the participants as originally desired. Digital conducted trainings inevitably lead not only to advantages but also always carry the risk that participants take on a passive and consumption-oriented position (Lehner, 2019).

¹ Describes the generation, which grew up in the digital age and is familiar with modern technologies from youth. In contrast to the previous generation, the digital immigrants, who discovered these modern technologies in adulthood (Prensky, 2001).

Moreover, digital training events compete with all digitally available business and leisure tools regarding the participant's attention. Figure 1 illustrates the leading distractions for employees working from home, which consist of social media, binge-watching, news media, and online shopping. Social media was the leading distraction for 61,6% of the employees working from home during COVID-19 (Mahipal, 2020).

The participant's attention span is much shorter at online events, and the distraction possibilities are much greater than at physical events (Knieriem & Luppold, 2021). Hence the digital training event design, including the didactical structure and methodology, plays a crucial role for the participant's attentiveness and consequently the training event's success (Mahipal, 2020). Attention is one essential basis of learning (Smallwood et al., 2007).

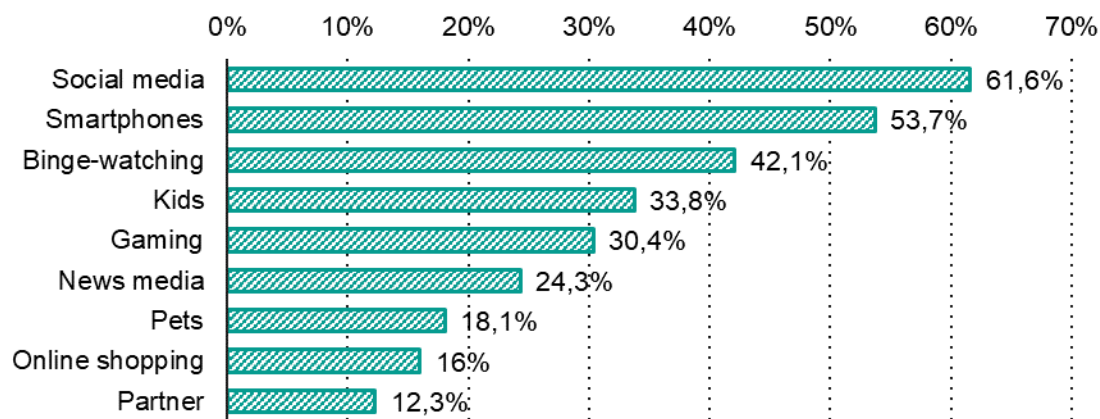


Figure 1: Leading distractions while working from home
Source: Modelled after Mahipal, 2020

Research Objective and Questions

This paper aims to identify conceptual success factors for high participant attentiveness in digital training events. In the context of this work, success factors for digital training design accumulate the didactical structure, methodology and the style of lecturing. Hence, this study attempts to examine the following research questions in more detail:

- Which success factors for digital training event design lead to high participant attentiveness?
- Which conceptual key elements, methodologies, and didactic concepts are required for training event design to reach a high and long attention span of participants?

Research Methodology

Based on the research questions, this thesis's scientific-theoretical approach is a qualitative research approach due to the open research question to gain scientific findings. The difference between a qualitative and a quantitative approach is that the quantitative approach, in contrast, focuses on measuring the characteristics of variables and their statistical analysis. Furthermore, this empirical study's research objective is application-oriented, focusing on digital training (Döring & Bortz, 2016).

Prior to the research and evaluation design and the data collection and analysis, quality criteria for qualitative research and a literature review are elaborated as the foundation for the study.

The investigation in the context of this work is aligned with an accumulated set of quality criteria for qualitative research comprising the seven criteria according to Steinke (1999) and the eight criteria of Tracy (2010). Both have conceptualized criteria for a standard evaluation of qualitative research. Hence, the following factors are considered in this work:

Criteria one defines the relevance of the topic, which points out the significance, relevance, and timeliness of the topic and is illustrated in the context of the problem statement (Steinke, 1999; Tracy, 2010).

The second quality standard refers to the accuracy and the intersubjective comprehensibility of the study (Steinke, 1999; Tracy, 2010). This concerns how third parties can reconstruct and evaluate the research process. For that purpose, one can rely on three approaches: The comprehensive documentation of the research process, the interpretation of the contents in groups, or the application of codified procedures. The first approach is used in this work, and all research steps are documented extensively and comprehensibly. The parts of the research to be documented are (Steinke, 1999; Tracy, 2010):

- The preliminary knowledge about the research subject,
- The study design and the research context,
- The transcription rules,
- The data,
- The evaluation method,
- The information sources,
- The challenges and decisions during the research process,
- The quality criteria that the work should meet,
- The reflection on the own subjectivity.

The third criterion refers to the limitations and the resonance of the work as well as the reflective subjectivity of the researcher. The researcher should self-reflect on his position, and relationships between the researcher and interview partner should be evaluated. Moreover, the overall limitations of the research and the conditions by which the results can be generalized and transferred are pointed out (Steinke, 1999; Tracy, 2010).

Criteria four is devoted to the credibility and traceability of the research, where the whole study approach is illustrated in detail. This involves verifying whether the procedure and the choice of the method are appropriate. Similarly, it is crucial for this criterion whether the selected cases and transcription rules have been chosen reasonably. Lastly, the individual methodological decisions and the selection of evaluation criteria are reviewed (Steinke, 1999; Tracy, 2010).

The following quality criterion assesses the empirical validity of the formulated hypotheses. This research's importance is attributed to the sufficient textual support of all conclusions and hypotheses (Steinke, 1999).

The final component is coherence, which determines whether the research results are self-consistent and achieve the initially stated targets (Steinke, 1999; Tracy, 2010).

Definition and Selection of Experts

Based on the current state of research, this study of gathering expert knowledge was designed. Hardly any specific educational or event study on the attention range during digital

training events has been published. Hence, the primary aim of this survey is to obtain meaningful findings for the research questions. The scientific foundation of this empirical study is based on the second principle of the qualitative research paradigm: the relative theoretical openness to form new theories (Döring & Bortz, 2016). In this context, the grounded theory methodology described by Glaser and Strauss (2010) is applied, aiming to approach theoretically unexplored or poorly explored objects in an unbiased manner. As a result, subject-related theories or new theories can be derived (Döring & Bortz, 2016).

According to Döring and Bortz (2016), the definition and recruitment of experts are a challenge, as there is no unique definition of experts in the research literature. Nonetheless, Gläser and Laudel (2010) classify experts as individuals with particular knowledge and abilities due to their specific functions or experience. They are not the research object but have exceptional knowledge of the research subject due to their particular context (Gläser & Laudel, 2010). Hence, the selection of experts can only be made considering the research objective. It is determined that only persons are interviewed who have appropriate know-how in the research field with the ability to provide the knowledge without preparation as authentic as possible and who put aside the intention of self-representation (Gläser & Laudel, 2010; Scholl, 2015).

The quality of the study and its results rely on the experts' qualifications and the information provided. Therefore, since the selection of experts is one of the relevant quality criteria of this study, the requirements for the experts must be defined in advance (Gläser & Laudel, 2010). Hence, one can refer to Gläser and Laudel (2010), who suggest four questions for the expert selection:

1. Who has the required information?
2. Who will be the most able person to provide accurate information?
3. Who will be the most willing persons to provide precise information?
4. Who will be available to provide the information?

As part of the qualitative research, two different groups of experts, each with three people, were interviewed. As experts, persons were considered who are able, willing, and available to provide knowledge in the context of this research. Thereby, a distinction is made between digital event organizers and adult learning specialists. It is assumed that the organizer of training or adult learning events represents the interests of the planner as well as the needs of the participant. The selected experts are expected to be able to provide information about the development of digital training events as well as the attention spans of attendees based on their experience or their current role. An additional interest group for this research could be the attendees themselves. However, these will not be considered for this study due to the limited scope of work. The complete list of experts and information on their position, professional experience, and industry can be found in Figure 2.

The selection of experts for the interviews followed the first principle of grounded theory methodology (theoretical sampling), which states that samples shall be comparable to each other in order to achieve multiple and significant samples. For confidentiality reasons, the identities of the interviewees are anonymized. (Glaser & Strauss, 2010).

Expert	Function / Title	Work experience	Industry
E1	Senior Account Manager	11+ Years	Digital Events & Training
E2	Head of Media Production	20+ Years	Digital Events
E3	Adult Learning & Media Coach	17+ Years	Adult Learning
E4	Project Manager	7+ Years	Digital Events
E5	Professor for academic didactics	12+ Years	Adult Learning/University
E6	Adult Learning Specialist	28+ Years	Adult Learning

Figure 2: Overview of experts

Practical Implications for High Attentiveness During Digital Training Events

The most crucial driver for attention is the host-speaker of the digital training event. According to Berridge (2007), the role of the speaker is classified in the Service Ecology and Design. As the host-speaker is steering the participant's attention, one speaker must take over a moderating role in the training. If there is only one speaker, then this speaker must also take a moderating role besides the general role of delivering content. The moderating role helps the recipient to follow the training and balances actively between the variety of stimuli, media, formats, tools, and content.

Moreover, as a moderator, it is required to have a high perceptual sensitivity to recognize whether participants can follow the content or not. Hence, it is recommended that either the speaker has moderating skills or a second speaker with a moderating role is acquired as support. Sustaining attention during a digital training event also requires that every speaker has sufficient rhetorical camera skills. This implies that speakers actively use their body language and facial expressions. Moreover, the speaker must look into the camera to build digital eye contact. Lastly, the voice and way of the presentation should be audible for the target audience regarding grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary. Therefore, to execute a successful digital training, it is highly recommended that speakers do rehearsals and speakers training up-front.

Information Design is equally important to the speaker's role, which focuses on the training's content, preparation, duration, and dramaturgy. First, the content must focus on the topic claimed as the training subject. Secondly, according to target group relevance, one must reduce the content to a minimum. Lastly, the more the content is up to date, individualized, and customized to the audience, the higher the participant's attentiveness will be. Therefore, a repetition of content should be avoided. Contents should always target to provide value-added information for the recipient. Brown and Aoki (2018) concluded that content is one key driver of attention and should be visually attractive, memorable, delightful, catchy, and concise. Besides relevant content, the content must be structured and planned in smaller segments and a good mix of input times, relaxation times, and self-study times. Zureck (2021) demonstrates that purely informational content can effectively be provided to learners in advance through videos. This approach allows educators more time for direct engagement with learners, ensuring that sessions remain interactive and avoid becoming tedious.

Hence, a clear pre-communicated agenda and a precisely planned content flow are required. Successful pre-communication can increase the curiosity for the event and reduce the bouncing rate. For the content, the same rule as for the speaker applies. A rehearsal of presentation and flow is one key success driver. Additionally, one must consider that the

maximum length of a digital training event should last 4 hours. As the attention span of participants is relatively short, one must consider break times and variation of stimuli in order to reactivate the participant's attention. Zureck (2021) reveals in previous research that the use of a diverse range of teaching tools positively influences the attention of digital learners. This methodological variety acts as a catalyst for re-engaging the learner. Being required to adapt to new formats and setups serves as a kind of 'wake-up call', revitalizing their learning experience.

Therefore, Interaction and Sensorial Design is summarized in the scope of digital training events and comprises the participant's activation through interaction and stimuli variation. Due to the short attention span of participants and the high number of screen-related and non-screen distractions as well as side activities, it is recommended to reactivate the participants regularly. Activations help to achieve participant's attentiveness and can be conducted by many different approaches, which are examined in the following: Participants can be activated through actively addressing and communicating with them, through discussions, involvement in the content, or collaboration tasks in order to work with other participants. In addition, participants can be activated through surprising and unexpected situations or stimuli of the senses. Participants can also be activated through the variation of the manner of presentation, the formats, the media used, the camera setting, or the number of speakers.

Moreover, activation can also be implemented through digital tools, like chat-functionalities, polling tools, or gamification and collaboration tools. To increase attention during a digital training event, one can use some of the prior listed activation and interaction methods to stimulate senses, but one should be aware that digital events might not succeed if purely based on interaction. Therefore, the relevance and role of the content, as well as the moderating activities of the speaker, should not be underestimated.

Environmental Design in digital training events comprises the technical setup of participants and speakers as well as the environmental design of the speakers' background. For high attentiveness and high participants engagement during digital training events, the technical equipment used by the participant is crucial. Hence, it is recommended to do prior connectivity and technical queries or tests with the customers. Moreover, the usability of the offline and online technologies and tools must fit the abilities and technical equipment of the target audience. Moreover, the speaker's technical setup should achieve a high-quality video camera resolution with excellent illumination, clear microphone voice, and a fast network connection. Lastly, the surroundings of the speaker should be supportive to the training message and not distracting from the speaker. For example, in technical training, it is recommended to have a technical surrounding with the products included. Surroundings can also be created via Greenscreens or virtual backgrounds or by using a professional studio for the event.

Lastly, Visual Design is directly connected to environmental design and refers to the visual layout of the speaker's surroundings, the digital room, and the content layout. The environmental design was elaborated in the previous paragraph in detail. The content must be designed impressively, easy to understand, visually attractive, and individualized to the target group in order to sustain attention to the presentation. In addition, the digital room should be designed supportive to the trainings overall objective and the host's corporate design. E.g., by implementing a company logo into the virtual backgrounds.

As a result of this empirical study, the researcher has developed an example digital training event schedule with a corresponding attention curve based on the conceptual recommendation. The curve can be described as a descending wave model and is visualized in figure 3.

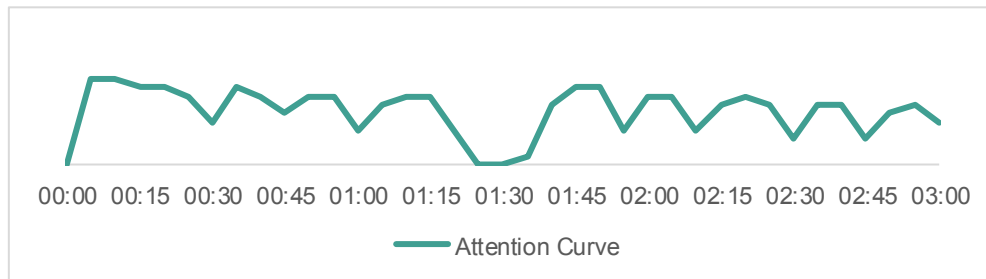


Figure 3: Attention curve in digital training events

The peak, in the beginning, is caused by the pre-communication, the unique, customized, and relevant contents, and the exciting start. Afterwards, the attention shrinks due to human attentiveness and distractions. With the help of different activation and variation techniques, the host-speaker can temporarily steer and increase attention. Therefore, he can vary between content, perspectives, speakers, breaks, collaboration, media, interaction, and surprises. For example, the drop after 25 min can be turned through a second speaker and a panel discussion of both. The second drop can be turned by starting a question-and-answer with the participants to create interaction between speakers and listeners. The third drop can be turned by a change of perspective and a live demonstration on a virtual whiteboard. The followed attention drop is turned by giving the participants a break. The event continues with different activation techniques to turn the attention drops through interaction and changes. The whole event should not last longer than 3 hours.

The results of the study and the recommendations derived show high similarities with the general recommendations from the adult learning industry. Hence, the digital training event must be designed in relation to event and adult learning methodologies. One approach for enabling variation during trainings can be implemented with storytelling. Through storytelling elements in digital training event, one can plan interactions as well as variations precisely in the whole scope of the training, as storytelling allows the integration of stimuli in one concept. Moreover, storytelling is, as described in 2.2.3, brain-friendly communication accumulating pictorial, motion-based, descriptive, and illustrative patterns which are familiar to the target audience. Hence, the researcher recommends the implementation of a storytelling-approach comprising the recommendations of the study in order to conduct digital training events with high attentiveness.

Another important practical implication based on the theoretical principles is the AIDA model. According to this model, attention funnels need to be built in order to transform attention into interest during the learning process. The expert testimonies confirm the relevance of attention attraction in the first segments of a digital training for sustaining attention during the course of the event.

Conclusion

This work aimed to determine conceptual approaches for digital training events in order to reach a high level of attention and a long attention span of the participants.

It was possible to answer the research questions based on the structured literature research and the expert interviews. The results of the empirical study indicate that the relocation of events to the digital space offers a range of opportunities and risks for organizers, speakers, and participants. These include, for instance, the increased accessibility of digital training events. However, emotions and body language are challenging to convey in the digital space. The findings show that the reduced attention span and the learning environment of the participants are one of the greatest challenges in digital training. In addition, content that works excellently in face-to-face events tends to fail in the digital space. Speakers lose the participant's attention due to the way the content is presented and the way it is designed. Attention is the essential factor in the learning process to understand and memorize content. Ergo, participant's high and long-lasting attention is an indicator for successful digital training events. In this connection, an important point to note is that the host of the event, i.e., the speaker, is essentially responsible for steering the participant's attention. For this purpose, the speaker must not only prepare and rehearse properly, but the speaker must also analyze the relevance of his content and reduce it to the essentials. Content must be presented in an aesthetical and pleasing manner and offer diversity in order to maintain attention. Diversity of stimuli is the central factor in the digital event. Considering that participants in digital training events are susceptible to screen-related and offline distractions, varied stimuli and surprises, as well as participant involvement, must be pursued. This can be done through interaction and activation. Apart from the didactic competencies, the technical environment and the usability for the participant must be assured.

Therefore, didactically, special emphasis must be placed on variety, excitement, and highlights, as well as a shorter duration. Understanding of and adaptation to the target group are required. Content must be reduced and simplified, a mix of different methods and various tools for maintaining communication help participants to learn. From an event conceptual point of view, storytelling in particular could be identified as a central element and success factor. Storytelling helps to convey content in a simple way and ensures attention and participation. Knowledge is thus conveyed on an emotional level.

Lastly, as one Expert stated, "It's the teacher's baby". The success of a digital event lies in the moderator's ability and commitment to manage the participant's attention. In conclusion, however, it is always important to remember that even the most diverse and interactive storytelling-based event will fail if the participant does not show up or other more important off- or online happenings occur. Furthermore, the exit of a digital training event is just one click away compared to face-to-face training events.

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