

## Learning distributed teamwork by creating webinars

Konstantin Korotov and Zoltán Antal-Mokos

ESMT – European School of Management and Technology, Berlin, Germany

### *Learning to work in a distributed team and a multi-modular executive-education design*

Working in distributed teams with members scattered around the globe is an increasingly demanded competence for modern executives. Many have to acquire the skills related to the organization of work and communication with colleagues in different time zones by trial and error. Although companies, business schools and consultancies include the topic of working in distributed teams in their management-development programmes, they often limit the method to traditional case-study discussions or to simulated exercises where participants work on an artificial task in different rooms of the same building over several hours.

At the same time, leadership and management-development literature has been calling for multi-method and multi-modular design of training and development interventions spread over a period of time and combining in-class experience with experiential learning between the modules (e.g. Kets de Vries and Korotov, 2007; Snook *et al.*, 2012; Korotov and Kets de Vries, 2010). Designing inter-modular assignments that make sense for participants and their organizations, that are self-contained and manageable within the time and resource constraints typical for today's training budgets, and that are interesting and meaningful for managers who may come from different departments and professional backgrounds, poses a significant challenge to the faculty of executive-education programmes. The inter-modular projects often become senseless exercises, draining participants' energy and time.

As a way of coping with the challenge of creating inter-modular assignments that would avoid the challenge of artificiality in diverse management groups distributed around the globe, and under the

increasing pressure to help participants to learn about working in distributed teams in an experiential setting, we designed and tested a task for participants that would simultaneously address a number of modern managerial competencies.

First, it puts the participants in a situation where they have a deliverable, self-contained final product while working from their remote locations (distributed teamwork). Second, participants learn to use technologies available for support of their distributed team work (mastering modern communication technology). Third, they get feedback on their results and also reflect on their experience with the view to distil lessons for their future work in distributed teams (reflection based on action-learning). Additionally, we thought about a project that could offer visibility to participants within their own organizations and, possibly, beyond them. The last point is particularly important in the light of the ongoing debate about leader versus leadership development in today's HR and learning and development practices (with leader development referring mainly to harnessing individual human capital, and leadership development being related to social capital and the increased capacity of organizational members to act together) (Day, 2000; Kets de Vries and Korotov, 2011).

### ***Preparing a webinar as a multi-modular assignment for teams of participants***

As a task, we asked the participants in a number of multi-modular programmes to prepare a webinar on a currently important topic. A webinar is an interactive seminar distributed via the internet with the audience and presenters interacting with each other from their computers anywhere in the world. The webinar is prepared between the on-campus modules of multi-modular programmes via the distributed-communication method. It is then delivered from the actual geographical locations of the participants in a synchronous manner, involving audiences from their organizations, wider community (e.g. alumni networks, students, or client and/or partner organizations) and business-school faculty and staff. Participants are asked to complete the whole process of webinar creation: concept, content development, delivery-platform choice and management, production, audience generation, delivery, follow-up, and finally reflection and submission of a short summary paper with the lessons learned based on their experience of working in a distributed team.

The participants are asked to work on the webinar in groups of five to seven. They are given from one to three months to design and deliver their product. We usually instruct the participant to select a topic that would reflect one of the issues important for organizations or business

at the time of the programme and that is aligned with the material covered during the on-campus module. Participants are specifically asked to limit the coverage of their topics so that it is manageable within a 45 to 60-minute time-frame, generally interesting to the management community and potentially useable in internal or external communication or training initiatives. For example, some of the webinar topics chosen by participants in our programmes have included:

- analysis of the leadership aspects of a failed merger between two global organizations;
- changes in the governing structure of a global financial institution;
- communication lessons from a recent disaster with a cruise liner;
- compliance measures after a corruption scandal in a global company; and
- diversity and women quota initiatives of companies and government bodies.

In our experience, we deliberately left it open for participants to choose the technological platform for the delivery of their webinars. The underlying purpose behind leaving this open was to encourage participants to explore resources available in their organizations for facilitation of distributed teamwork and remote meetings and training interventions. As it turned out, for many of the participants it was an eye-opener that their organizations had invested heavily in various technological tools facilitating distributed team-work. The assignment encouraged participants to explore the options available, engage with IT specialists, and learn how the equipment worked. When organizations lacked the technological infrastructure, participants explored the option available outside their organizations, such as commercial webinar platform providers offering their services for free or on a pay-as-you-go basis. In addition, participants worked with the distributed team-work tools (e.g. wiki, chats and intranet fora) made available to them via the online learning platform of the business school, in-house facilities in their organizations, or, in some cases, available from public providers.

The participants were supported by the faculty in the process of their webinar preparation through e-mail or telephone consultations. Mostly the questions raised by the participants were related to the choice of content, with occasional requests for help in finding appropriate conceptual models or theories to explain the facts presented in the webinar and to generalize for further learning points. It should be noted that, in the case of the business school, participants, as part of the business-school community, had access to the institution's information centre and library subscribing to a wide variety of academic and

managerial publications and databases, and they were encouraged to access those resources remotely.

The participants were responsible for organizing all the work among themselves which, as later reported in reflection papers, had all the challenges of working in a distributed team, such as competing priorities and tasks generated at the location of each participant, different time zones, technological glitches, cross-cultural communication barriers exacerbated by lack of personal contact, unclear leadership distribution, motivational differences and so on. They were also responsible for scheduling the webinar (another challenge for a team spread, for example, between Latin America, north America, Europe, and south-east Asia) generating their own global audiences within and outside their organization and organizing access to their webinars (e.g. providing instructions for joining, managing registration, offering tutorials or support for first-time users of webinar technology). Scheduling the faculty attendance was one of the challenges as well, because of other tasks and priorities of the instructors involved (which was a reflection of the need to manage critical stakeholders). We encouraged the participants to reach out to current MBA and EMBA students, as well as the business school's alumni, to enhance their webinars' outreach. As a side effect, we wanted to bring together various school communities via these events. All the groups invited colleagues from their own companies, and some invited clients, suppliers or personal acquaintances to join the webinars. The actual number of participants in the webinars organized in our programmes varied from slightly over a dozen to 35. At least one faculty member attended each of the webinars.

### ***Extension of the method to full-time MBA programmes***

Having experimented with the webinar creation as a teaching method in multi-modular programmes, we extended the approach to full-time MBA programmes. With full-time MBA students, the work was done by teams of students working together in the same location, but with the audience generated worldwide. The students are requested to refer to preceding MBA required and elective courses when defining their topic and developing the webinar content. The webinar is used to give students a chance to integrate learning outcomes of multiple MBA courses when dealing with complex modern management reality issues. Examples of topics chosen by full-time MBA students for their webinars include:

- Should investment and commercial banks be separated?
- Apple versus Samsung: future consequences for product development.

- Petrobras: the impact of currencies on global corporations.
- Facebook's organ-donation success needs follow-up.
- Challenges of global group structures and outsourcing: responsible supply-chain management.

In the case of full-time MBA students who do not have access to corporate remote-communication technology, access to web-based webinar platforms is provided by the school.

### ***Post-webinar reflections***

The participants were asked to reflect on their webinar preparation and delivery experiences and submit a written summary of their work. They also could discuss their learning points during the on-campus modules of their programmes. The faculty provided the participants with oral and/or written feedback on their webinar, with emphasis on the topical content and the experience of attending the webinar on the receiving end. After the groups conducted their reflection exercises, the faculty provided further feedback on their work as a distributed team. The reflections on the experience are a powerful element in the application of this method, as they allow to capture the experience, explore underlying challenges and generate actionable learning points for the participants involved. Instructors can use reflections on the experience of working in a distributed team as a starting point for introduction of theoretical material or for group coaching or a peer-coaching session (e.g. Korotov, 2008).

Overall, the participants report positive experience from preparing and running their webinars. This experience offers a complete cycle on working in a remote-team environment with a final product that can be used for multiple purposes (e.g. running a training session within an organization, presenting a management challenge to a group of stakeholders or engaging in a professional community). Occasional challenges with the functioning of technology, although annoying at the time of occurrence, are reported to lead to important learning points that can be further shared with IT specialists inside the involved organization or forwarded as feedback to external providers. Participants also report increased interest in attending webinars organized by various education providers as a learning option for their further development and consideration of the method for internal use in their organizations.

### ***Potential challenges and limitations of the method***

As with any intra-modular assignments, one of the most important challenges is the meaningfulness of the task today's busy executives are

asked to engage in, usually in addition to their already busy schedules. While work in a distributed team is a critical competence developed through this method, participants need to see the value of both the content of the task and the method that they are learning to use. It is also important that the organization that uses the proposed method is genuinely interested in the task that participants are working on. It can be very frustrating when the sponsors or organizers of the executive programme do not know about the webinar or do not participate in it.

The method heavily depends on modern technology, which at times fails to deliver according to the expectations. While this is part of life, it can be very frustrating when participants generate an international audience and particularly when their important stakeholders are in it.

The method requires the commitment and engagement of the faculty. Participants often come back to the faculty with content-related questions and they also expect meaningful feedback on their work. As with any written assignments in an executive-education setting, feedback on the reflection papers is also expected, and takes faculty's time and effort.

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***Points for thought***

- Creating webinars by participants is an inexpensive and effective way of learning to work in distributed teams as an inter-modular assignment in multi-modular executive programmes.
- In addition to distributed team-work, participants learn how to use modern communication technology, enabling such collaboration.
- Webinars can be used to extend the benefits of a participant's engagement in executive programmes to other constituencies (colleagues, subordinates, clients, professional communities).

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Konstantin Korotov, PhD, is Associate Professor and Director of the Centre for Leadership Development Research at ESMT European School of Management and Technology in Berlin, Germany. His research interests involve leadership development, executive education, career development and executive coaching. He teaches worldwide in executive education, EMBA and MBA programs.

Zoltán Antal-Mokos, PhD, is Professor and Dean of Degree Programs at ESMT European School of Management and Technology in Berlin, Germany. His research interests are in the fields of strategy and management education.

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