



Worker Safety

Virtual Safety Training: How MSA Uses Technology to Safeguard Your Workers

Roland Jones | Sep 17, 2020

Virtual training allows safety professionals to stay up to date on the latest safety practices despite dwindling travel budgets and the need for widespread physical distancing. Here's how MSA Safety has ramped up its *virtual training program* to respond to meet industry needs.

When a medium-sized global pharmaceutical company based in the Southeast decided to cancel its confined space training at MSA Safety's headquarters earlier this year because of the pandemic, MSA immediately offered virtual training sessions instead.

At first, the pharmaceutical company was skeptical; its safety leaders didn't want to swap an in-person training program for a virtual one. So MSA's team suggested the company leaders participate in an "open house"—a 20-minute online demonstration of MSA's virtual training capabilities.

The impact was remarkable. After seeing that demonstration "the customer realized we could adequately address all of their concerns virtually, while still providing the quality training they need for their team without a face-to-face class," says Rebecca Trimpey, senior global training manager at MSA Safety.

"Safety training has been a particular area of focus for us over the last five years, and we've been really trying to advance the cause globally because, regardless of what industry they are in, we believe in teaching workers how to do their jobs safely so they can go home at the end of the day."

Rebecca Trimpey
MSA Safety

"Now they're convinced virtual training does work," she adds, noting that MSA's approach allows companies such as this one to overcome constrained travel budgets and social distancing needs, "which a lot of people are very concerned about right now."

Indeed, months of lockdowns, a global pandemic and squeezed corporate budgets have created a perfect storm for the safety training market. But worker safety is just as important as it ever was. The current situation calls for innovative solutions, and that's where companies like MSA Safety step in.

Thanks to advancements in technology, MSA can now conduct fully immersive digital training programs with instructors stationed in remote classrooms.

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After launching as a pilot program last October with one training center, MSA's virtual safety training classes are now broadcast from four centers in North America (containing a total of eight rooms). In addition to classes conducted in English, training is now available in Spanish and French, and with 23 training centers throughout the globe available to the company, including in Europe, MSA can offer virtual training programs worldwide.

Doubling Down on Technology

The growth was fueled by several million dollars of investment, which has gone into upscaling training centers globally—acquiring new equipment (cameras, screens and microphones), changing the footprint of each training center, and investing in technology that allows instructors to communicate with class attendees while moving around a facility to demonstrate equipment and safety procedures.

Before COVID-19, training was a small percentage of MSA's business, but the pandemic has helped MSA expand their training offering and programs, with training now contributing over \$4 million in revenue. With the cost of travel gone, and users able to train and learn about products without too much interruption to their lives, customers are more likely to jump online for a virtual course that they might not have taken in the past if there are fewer barriers to doing so, Trimpey says.

"Regardless of the epidemic, this [training] is certainly a growing field, and so we are looking at more virtual classes, blended learning and even some online classes with 3D applications so we can really simulate people in the environment that they work in—and all of that will be incorporated into our programs," she says.

Not surprisingly, MSA's virtual training sessions have flourished in recent months, and they are exceeding customers' expectations, according to Trimpey.

"People are blown away with the depth of the training, and we've actually had people say they prefer the virtual training not only for the safety reasons but because being in a physical class surrounded by others means you can't always see everything as clearly as you'd like. It's easier if you have an overhead camera focusing down [on a table] and you're not jockeying for position with others in a physical space. We've had a lot of really good feedback on that."

The Future Is Virtual

For years, MSA's training programs were conducted entirely in person, whether it was an open enrollment class that anyone could attend or an MSA instructor visiting a particular company or organization. But as the price and availability of technology has changed, and new generations of workers are more comfortable with digital communications, the trend is clearly toward virtual training, Trimpey says.

"Late last year, we started to evaluate the options available to us that would ramp up our virtual training capabilities, whether that's 100 percent online or blended for more technical classes where the student could do the theoretical piece at their convenience and then go online for the practical part," Trimpey says. MSA decided to run some pilots with their less technical classes and began to purchase cameras and set up a state-of-the-art audiovisual system. Once the company was happy that it could maintain the quality of its classes in the virtual world, it launched its virtual curriculum last October.

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These virtual classes are not the kind with a boring PowerPoint and a voice like Charlie Brown's teacher in the background. If you're doing a fall protection class, for example, you can see the instructor and join group discussions with other participants. The instructor can demonstrate something on the whiteboard, show illustrations in the manual or do closeups on the equipment to explain, for instance, how to do an inspection, or how to change a sensor. Using GoPros and other technology, instructors can livestream a rescue procedure, or they can climb on a ladder to demonstrate the proper use of safety equipment. Class participants watch in real time as if they were there in the classroom but do so from the safety and convenience of their own home or office.

"We feel this is very important to invest in because it allows us to reach more people than we would have been able to reach in a shorter amount of time if we had to get on a plane and fly somewhere or fly people into our training facility," Trimpey says.

"We've trained about 35,000 people through July compared with about 19,000 last year during the same period. This is allowing us to help even more companies understand safety procedures because we're finding that instead of training four or five people on a site, we can now train up to 40 because our programs are so accessible."

Advancing the Safety Cause

In addition to its virtual training classes, MSA offers a Netflix-type library of prerecorded training videos through the MSA-U Training Center. The center includes over 150 free online programs that cover MSA products and technologies, or general industry safety standards.

"So if someone buys a piece of equipment, for example, they can use MSA-U to learn how to use the equipment correctly, but it's not the immersive experience where you can talk to an instructor or others sharing the class with you," Trimpey says. "We've got multiple avenues for customers and channel partners to access training."

In the end, the move to virtual training is less about technology and more about convenience, Trimpey says.

"Safety training has been a particular area of focus for us over the last five years, and we've been really trying to advance the cause globally because, regardless of what industry they are in, we believe in teaching workers how to do their jobs safely so they can go home at the end of the day," she says.

How do you feel about virtual training versus face-to-face training? Share your thoughts in the comments below.