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Laura Nelson

ZOOMING OFF

Will live online courses come to dominate periodic driver CPC training long-term once the pandemic has abated, asks Steve Banner

Restrictions triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a switch to live online periodic driver CPC (Certificate of Professional Competence) training sanctioned by the DVSA to avoid the risk of infection. In-vehicle and classroom-based training restarted in April, although at the time of writing the DVSA was still encouraging remote delivery of training where possible to minimise any risk of spreading the virus.

Future moves much depend on the stance adopted by the DVSA and JAUPT, the Joint Approvals Unit for Periodic Training.

DVSA has been conducting a consultation on the efficacy of online courses and whether they should remain as an option, which has recently closed. Many training companies would welcome their continued availability, and believe it would be supported by both transport fleets and drivers.

"It wasn't so much that live online training was completely banned before the pandemic, it was more that it didn't occur to training companies to suggest offering it," says one trainer. "People weren't nearly as aware of Zoom and Teams as they are now."

For one, Fleet Source has delivered periodic CPC training online to almost 15,000 drivers during the COVID-19 outbreak (pictured above).



Chief executive officer Nick Caesari believes the roll-out of online courses has benefited the transport industry, and hopes it will continue. Individual drivers no longer have to spend time travelling to training centres, he points out, and trainers no longer have to travel to depots to deliver courses to groups of drivers. Costs are incurred in both cases, and unnecessary travel is of course environmentally-damaging.

Yet while online training can work out cheaper overall for clients, any reduction in the course fee itself may not be all that dramatic, according to Laura Nelson, managing director of training company RTITB. She says: "A big chunk of the fee represents the trainer's time and the time taken to prepare the course." That will remain the same no matter whether the course is delivered online or face-to-face.

Not everyone takes this view. "Switching to online has enabled us to reduce our prices by 50%," says E P Training Services director, Sean Pargeter. "It's a shame it didn't happen earlier."

PREVENTING ZOOM FATIGUE

Sitting in front of a computer screen for seven hours on a Zoom or Teams call watching and listening to a talking head can soon become boring, so trainers need to adapt their approach accordingly.

Says Caesari: "We've invested heavily in our own TV studios built to help us create courses that look rather like a Sky News broadcast. We've had eight studios constructed and it has cost us thousands of pounds."

Some training companies keep an online invigilator present as well as a trainer to ensure delegates haven't

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sneaked off to watch television. If courses can be made interesting and lively, though, then there should be no lack of engagement by attendees; and Fleet Source has commissioned research into its verdict on its TV studio-based 'LIVE' courses.

"In a survey of 2,961 participating drivers conducted independently, 69% of them said that the interaction between them and the trainer worked just as well online as it did in the classroom," Caesari reports. 56% stated that, given the opportunity, they would receive all their training through LIVE rather than participate in classroom-based training.

In almost 90% of cases, the drivers undergoing online training with Fleet Source have been doing so from home, and technology has not proved to be a barrier.

Another voice echoes those conclusions. "Drivers have got used to using Zoom or Teams to stay in touch with their family and friends over the past 12 months, and to participate in events such as pub quizzes," says Louise Elstone, product manager, driver CPC training, at TTC Group.

BARRIERS TO VIRTUAL LEARNING

However, James Firth, head of road freight regulation at Logistics UK, sounds a cautionary note. "Commercial vehicle drivers don't have home offices, and a lot of employers are concerned that they won't have suitable equipment to undergo online training, or a suitable place to sit," he observes.

Says Nelson: "Some smaller companies and drivers are not all that computer-savvy, and may want to go back to the classroom. Large companies with multiple sites seem to prefer online, though."

Some courses are impossible to deliver online, though, she adds, including those covering first aid. The

DUPLICATION CRACKDOWN

DVSA and JAUP are taking a much tougher line on the unnecessary repetition of courses.

They accept that repetition may be necessary if for example it contributes to maintaining a qualification - first aid, for example - or if drivers clearly failed to comprehend what they were told first time round.

"However the regulations specify that a range of different subjects should be covered over the driver's 35 hours of training," they point out. "DVSA/JAUP will monitor training uploads, and potentially take action against drivers and trainers if we identify unnecessary repetition of course attendance in a rolling five-year period.

"Doing the same course five times in quick succession cannot be justified."

practicalities of load restraint may fall into that category too; there is no real substitute for physically getting to grips with the niceties of securing a pallet in a curtainsider trailer.

Nor is there anything that can replicate the feeling of having a truck pass really close to you when cycling. Nelson is thinking of the sort of safe urban driving course which is supported by FORS, which involves drivers riding a bike in traffic so that they can see things from a cyclist's viewpoint.

Similarly, driving a truck with an experienced trainer in the cab with you can lead to better fuel consumption and fewer accidents thanks to the knowledge imparted. Unfortunately the reality is that only two delegates can be accommodated at a time, compared with up to 20 in a classroom; and that can make it expensive.

"This type of in-cab training

represents less than 1% of all the courses we deliver," says Nelson.

Caesari readily concedes that certain types of CPC course are difficult to replicate online, and that online training in front of a screen is not the only approach. For example, Fleet Source has been busy creating a 360° hazard perception course that uses virtual reality headsets, an initiative which has involved working with the British Horse Society. Restrictions imposed by the pandemic meant that the headsets remained idle at the time of writing, but such a course could benefit drivers on country routes who regularly encounter horses and other potential rural risks.

"We've developed a virtual reality counter-terrorism course as well," says Caesari.

TTC is making use of video technology, says Elstone, so that trainers can observe delegates remotely while they are at the wheel or securing loads, assess their performance, and help them improve. The all-seeing video eye means that errors can be spotted that could be missed if the trainer was actually there with the driver, she adds.

Caesari predicts that at least 50% of driver CPC training will be delivered online post-pandemic. "Much depends on the DVSA's attitude though," he says.

One key change was made last year, points out Firth. "Two hours of a seven-hour classroom course can now be completed using e-learning either the previous day or before the five hours of classroom training starts," he says.

Adds Nelson: "It is of course easier for JAUP to audit remote courses than ones that are classroom-based." Auditors can dip into them while sitting in front of their computers rather than being obliged to travel to a training centre. 