



insync**Center**

101 Tips to Motivate
the Online Learner

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Introduction

We all understand how to learn in a traditional classroom environment. We've been doing that all of our lives. It's comfortable.

Online learning has introduced a new learning culture - one that takes time with which to become familiar. Organizations spend a lot of time planning for, and investing in, technologies - but often forget about the culture change involved with this new learning environment.

In order for online learning to be successful, we need to create environments in which people can effectively learn. Our participants need to be open to learning in this new way, and confident that their time invested in professional development is well-spent.

Take a close look at the items in this booklet and you'll see that motivation often comes down to answering the question "What's In It For Me?" The latest technologies and best designs won't mean a thing if you can't answer that question for your participants.

So how do we motivate our online participants? Keep these 101 tips (in 10 categories) in mind when designing your courses and interacting with participants and you may be amazed at what a difference a little motivation makes.

Publish Requirements And Set Expectations Ahead Of Time

Getting more work than you bargained for or taking a class that isn't appropriate isn't only demotivating, it can be downright aggravating. Armed with enough information about course requirements, participants can make an informed choice about the appropriateness of the course or the time commitment involved. If the course is required, individuals can try to balance their schedules to accommodate the workload and can inform supervisors regarding any impact on normal duties.

Tip #1

Create a course description which links the objectives of your course to the professional development of the participants AND to the business goals of the organization. Posting this on a website allows you to take advantage of hyperlinks and ensure that information does not go out of date, and enables potential participants to do their own "research" and make decisions about the relevance of a course to their work.

Tip #2

Create a course web site that includes: a detailed course description, schedules, learning objectives, work assignments, testimonials, training blend, FAQ's, and time investment. Whenever you communicate with participants about online courses, be sure to reference the site so that it becomes "the spot" for all online learning information.

Tip #3

Start a newsletter to share your participants' enthusiasm and experiences. Use the newsletter to acknowledge participants' milestones and goals. Publish the newsletter on a regular basis so participants begin to look forward to receiving it. For an example of a newsletter supporting a curriculum, visit: <http://www.insynctraining.com/insync/newsletter/volume1a.htm>

Tip #4

Establish a support plan. Let participants know how to contact technical and instructional support. If they know that help is there when they need it, they will feel much more comfortable about entering the online learning arena. Support can include help desk numbers, virtual office hours, a printed list of important email addresses and URLs, and the facilitator's contact information.

Tip #5

Participants should be expected to commit to all course requirements. Attendance policies should be enforced. Not only will individuals miss valuable content, but the value of the online learning experience will be undermined if participants are allowed to pick and choose what sessions to attend (this applies to all sessions in the blended design, not just the online session).

Tip #6

Establish and publish a set of ground rules regarding how the participant should behave while participating. Include advance organizers that inform your participants what is expected of them. And don't forget to include some type of checklist they can use so they are ready and prepared for each class.

Tip #7

Let participants know how often they will be hearing from you and what will be contained in the different communications (see the next tip for more information). You want to ensure participants don't miss important communications because they didn't read the email.

Tip #8

Include in all communications:

- What to do when a live session is missed
- What to do to prepare for the next session
- The information needed to attend the next session (URL, date, time, phone, etc.)

Tip #9

Offer orientation sessions that familiarize the participants with the technological interface and allow them to "play" and experience an online class.

Tip #10

Post recordings or excerpts from courses on the company website so that individuals can get an idea of what online learning is all about without having to sign up and commit to a course. Make sure you include a demonstration from the following components:

- Synchronous classes
- Discussion boards
- Tutorials

Establish Relevance

Before requiring someone to take a course, communicate the reasons why the content is important to the individual and the organization. If the participants don't understand the relevance, they will tend to do the minimal amount necessary in order to complete the program.

Tip #11

Tie the training to "must do" items in the participant's professional development plan and on the job application; e.g. a regulatory issue or a legal requirement that must be met.

Tip #12

Understand your audience. Learn about their needs and what gaps need to be filled by the training initiative. What type of learners are they? Have they taken this type of learning before? These questions play a role in how you will deliver your content.

Tip #13

Required training should strongly link to business goals and to personal development plans.

Tip #14

Non-required training is rarely completed because most people feel they do not have time to devote. Again, tie the relevance of the training to a person's own job or professional development.

Tip #15

Your design should incorporate the opportunity for participants to practice and receive immediate feedback so they can immediately apply what they learned back on the job.

Tip #16

Make sure that whatever is taught can be used on-the-job in a timely manner. If training comes too early or too late in the on-the-job process, participants will feel their time has been wasted and this will negatively affect the image of online learning in your organization.

Tip #17

Create a list of "talking points" so that managers can intelligently communicate the importance of online learning initiatives in staff meetings and performance reviews.

Tip #18

Create a requirement in the performance review process which includes a certain percentage of one's professional development to be taken via an online or blended format.

Tip #19

With time crunches and deadlines, it's hard to take a full day or more away from work; online learning allows one to take advantage of time. This advantage should be heavily marketed.

Tip #20

Reinforce that online learning is part of the learning culture in your organization. The economic and accessibility elements of online learning will make it more and more prevalent as time goes on.

Provide Continuous Encouragement

Participants can quickly lose motivation by feeling “lost in cyberspace.” Email and other communications are great, cheap, and easy ways to encourage your online learners. Knowing that a real person is watching out for you helps humanize the online environment, and motivates participants to stay engaged.

Tip #21

Encourage participants to extend the training beyond the event coaching each other after the session. This will encourage open discussions and allow the participants to learn from each other as well as foster a sense of community and collaboration.

Tip #22

Keep in touch with participants throughout the course. Send out email reminders and offers of assistance and personally call participants that miss a class to discuss makeup options.

Tip #23

Create an incentive plan to encourage participation throughout the program. Everyone loves working towards something tangible. (See our tips on Rewards and Recognition for ideas on how to implement an incentive plan.)

Tip #24

Acknowledge your participants by thanking them for a response or comment during class and follow up your final class with a thank you note. Words of thanks can go a long way. Their effect can be just as effective as offering tangible rewards.

Tip #25

Celebrate small success by sending emails or posting the “good news.” Acknowledge milestones publicly and personally. This will foster a sense of continuity and support throughout your training initiative.

Tip #26

During class, call on your participants by name-make it personal and positive. Continuous encouragement is critical. Stay close to your participants and let them know that you were once in their shoes.

Tip #27

Encourage collaboration between participants and the training team. Make sure they understand that everyone is in this together and as a team many accomplishments can be achieved. Each individual will bring something unique to your class; acknowledge that unique spirit and create a team effort.

Tip #28

Support asynchronous components by contributing and participating as frequently as possible. Don't let the offline time become unimportant - value it as much as you value your live online classes. Provide positive feedback in the discussion boards and use probing questions to encourage participation.

Tip #29

Be positive and encouraging but don't overdo it because then the praise will become insignificant. Stick to your objectives. When your participants successfully achieve these objectives, provide your positive words appropriately. Make sure feedback is substantive and useful.

Tip #30

Have participants vote on the best discussion board response of the week. Offer the best “posters” a reward either as a tangible one or recognition of some sort. At the beginning of the next online synchronous event, the facilitator can announce which posting received the most votes. The post can be read and used as a launching point for new discussions.

Assessment

When they know they will be tested, participants are motivated to learn. Don't focus solely on assessing the live interactions and activities. Use a variety of assessment techniques before, during, and after the curriculum.

Tip #31

Assess all components of the blend. If you focus solely on the live online environment, participants will come to view the self directed components as optional and often will not complete them.

Tip #32

Build in tests throughout the training rather than waiting until the end. Including assessment throughout keeps participants engaged, and helps the facilitator to keep a pulse on the class.

Tip #33

Require participation and feedback in discussion boards. Use this asynchronous component of your course to help peers "evaluate" one another's work. This also reduces the amount of work the facilitator needs to do.

Tip #34

Invite supervisors to observe synchronous classes. This allows participants to show the value of the learning to the organization and to demonstrate what they have learned to their supervisors. This also reinforces the concept of the learning organization when training is viewed as a participative activity rather than something the participant "goes off to do."

Tip #35

When publishing the course requirements, also publish the assessment techniques. Let potential participants know that if they do not meet the minimum requirements at the end of the course they will need to take the class again.

Tip #36

Ask the participants follow-up questions either verbally (i.e. a 10 minute debrief at the end of class) or provide a form for them to complete to discover how they feel about the class.

Tip #37

Establish a makeup policy. In it include how participants can make up for missed classes and missed work. If you have an incentive program in place, link your makeup policy to your incentives. The fact that one has completed makeup work is an assessment in itself.

Tip #38

Use pre-tests to set an expectation of what will be learned and evaluated.

Tip #39

Involve your participants in a portion of the facilitator's evaluation process. This may include a self evaluation or peer evaluation pertaining to a specific objective. This will give participants more autonomy and control of their learning. In addition, it will motivate them to be more aware and involved during the training sessions.

Tip #40

Use presentations, demonstrations and activities. Not all content can be objectively evaluated. Using presentations or demonstrations allows participants to demonstrate to you and to one another that they have mastered new skills and internalized the content.

Organizational Support

One of the most difficult parts about learning at one's desk is the constant interruptions by those working around you. There is a perception that online learning can be interrupted - but the reality is that once a participant has been interrupted several times, retention falls and the chances that the program will be completed is dramatically lessened. If participants feel they need to work after-hours in order to complete a program, they will grow to resent the online medium.

Tip #41

Use a manager orientation to online learning so managers can both participate in the experience and understand the importance of the time commitment required of participants.

Tip #42

Encourage everyone in a team or unit to complete the course together - even if they must take the course on alternate schedules to allow for departmental coverage. This enables participants to learn from their supervisors and peers, and can assist motivation by encouraging a "we're all in this together" mentality.

Tip #43

For intact workgroups participating in the same class, the supervisor should send out the initial communication to participants. The facilitator can write the communication, but it should be sent from the supervisor's mailbox. The supervisor should also follow-up after class with a "How was your experience?" email.

Tip #44

"Off limits" signs are invaluable to preserving one's learning time and concentration. This may be as simple as tying a ribbon across the entry way of one's cubicle or wearing a "learning hat" that signals "If I'm wearing this, I'm learning. No interruptions!"

Tip #45

Use a supervisor or a past participant to "team-teach" a class with you. Participants will be able to identify with this person since they are from the same workgroup.

Tip #46

Online learning can be an opportunity to give participants access to people within the organization they may not ordinarily have access to. Invite internal "guest" speakers to make brief presentations to your class. When participants are familiar with a person's name or title, they typically enjoy the experience of having one-on-one time with an internal expert, authority, or manager.

Tip #47

Develop an internal communication forum so that new participants can gain insight from experienced online learners regarding how to solve problems they may be experiencing. Link every online course description to this forum so that all individuals can have immediate access to internal expertise and advice.

Tip #48

If participants would have otherwise attended training during their regular workday, the online learning initiative should be no different. Establish a prohibition of "off-hours" participation. This includes weekends, after-hours, and lunch breaks.

Tip #49

Create an orientation to the online learning experience. Online learning is new and mysterious (and intimidating) to most individuals. A playful "let's get to know what online learning is all about" will go a long way toward creating an organization that embraces online learning as a regular course of business. For an example of this type of course, visit InSync Center. We offer several free "Learn How To Learn Online" sessions each month.

Tip #50

Take advantage of the time flexibility online learning provides to create scheduling options conducive to a variety of people's schedules. Since no live online class should be more than 2 hours, it is possible to offer many choices, such as early morning, mid-morning, late afternoon, etc.

Continuous Internal Marketing

In our networked world, word gets around fast. Make sure the word about online learning is positive, and constantly being reinforced. An initial marketing burst without a continuing campaign will make your initiative seem like another passing fad. Regular news about what courses are coming up, and their importance to the organization, will help employees to understand that online learning is an integral part of the organization's learning culture. If online learning is "in," employees will demand to be part of the action.

Tip #51

Make the "What's In It For Me?" message loud and clear. Provide information about why and how the training will benefit the participants. Use testimonials or create a meeting date so interested participants can come and ask questions about the value online learning offers.

Tip #52

Ask participants for testimonials immediately after training - make it part of the evaluation form. It is important to capture positive comments about the online learning experience when emotions and satisfaction are high.

Tip #53

Use the company intranet, emails, and bulletin boards to market the benefits of online learning. Keep this communication ongoing so that it doesn't lose its potency and continues to attract new participants.

Tip #54

Use online learning to teach about online learning. Set up an orientation meeting within the platform so people can see what to expect and how online learning works. Provide instructions and guidelines so potential participants also can see how communication will work during a course. Advertise the orientation as a "sneak peek" of what's to come, keep it short, and schedule it at a quiet time in your organization. You can also record the orientation for on-demand playback.

Tip #55

Get your subject matter experts to help you spread the word about the online learning initiative. Keep in touch with people that are excited about training. Have them share their experience and talk about it with other departments, supervisors, and employees. Remember - word of mouth is one of the most powerful ways to spread the news.

Tip #56

Create a theme or "campaign" for your online learning initiative. The creative use of posters, table tents, fonts, colors and logos can keep your campaign exciting. Keep the campaign organized and on a regular schedule.

Tip #57

Send a regular weekly or monthly email so employees start to look forward to receiving it. Make sure the subject line of the email is attention grabbing so it does not get lost in the shuffle of emails that everyone receives.

Tip #58

Include a survey about potential training programs as part of your marketing campaign so you can identify issues that may be hot-buttons, unclear, or very popular. Feedback will help you learn what is and isn't working.

Tip #59

Get the company newsletter to dedicate a specific section to online learning. Post regular updates, events and milestones so that they can be shared with all employees-even while the course is still going on.

Tip #60

Create a "brand" for your online learning initiative. Create a logo and put it on everything you distribute, including workbooks, "Do Not Disturb" signs, certificates of completion, maybe even facilitator T-shirts! If you'd like a sample "eLearning in Progress- Do Not Disturb" doorhanger, send an email to info@insynctraining.com.

Management Mandate

If potential participants know that management is behind an online learning initiative, they'll be more inclined to sign-up. Get management involved by inviting them to record short presentations to welcome participants and encourage them to participate throughout the curriculum.

Tip #61

Make management responsible for the final evaluation, because management is ultimately responsible for determining whether or not behavior has changed or skills have been learned.

Tip #62

Part of a manager's evaluation at the end of the year should include the percentage of his/her employees that have participated in online learning.

Tip #63

Professional development budgets should encourage the participation in any type of online learning - not just those offered by your organization.

Tip #64

Create a learning plan for the management team. Illustrate milestones, objectives and the processes that participants will complete during the training. Outline specific dates and include invitations to the management team to participate and evaluate the process.

Tip #65

Invite managers to participate right from the beginning. Whether it is to proofread communications or participate in ongoing courses - get them involved. Have management spread the word about the value and importance that the organization is placing on this training initiative. Employees look up to management, and if managers are taking it seriously, so will your participants.

Tip #66

Include managers throughout the entire process. Things like their presence at initial sessions and signatures on communications will communicate that the training process is a very important and serious venture. Management should also be made aware of feedback and changes made to the program based on that feedback.

Tip #67

Include online learning as part of the yearly or bi-yearly performance review. Advise participants that this is a part of their "regular" employment at your company and that management will take into consideration their participation and success in the online learning process.

Tip #68

Dedicate a session specifically for educating management about the training. Tie the learning to corporate goals and objectives and provide links to outside sources (customers, suppliers, vendors) where the management team can go to learn more.

Tip #69

Require management approval before an employee can sign up for a course and have them sign off on any "expectations" they have for the employee as a result of attending. By putting a formal process in place, participants will not only be responsible for the course content but also for how it will be applied within the organization.

Tip #70

Make it easy for managers to stay informed. As the facilitator you can supply management with survey results or other assessment tools to communicate how the learning initiative is being received and what business goals have been achieved.

Rewards and Recognition

It feels great to answer a question correctly, and to receive feedback from facilitators and peers. Participants often don't expect positive reinforcement from online courses. Find ways to build in opportunity for tangible rewards and recognition - even for asynchronous programs. Ensure participants that the time they spend in online programs is recognized as a valuable contribution to their professional development.

Tip #71

Provide completion certificates for interim courses and curriculums. People love to hang symbols of achievement on their cubicle walls. Subtle momentum will be built throughout the organization as more and more certificates are publicly displayed.

Tip #72

People like to see their name in print. Publish a regular report containing the names of people who have successfully finished courses.

Tip #73

If online learning is successfully integrated into the performance management system, participants can look forward to it assisting them in their career advancement.

Tip #74

Develop an incentive plan offering "bonus points" that can be awarded to your participants based on their accomplishments. Set out your objectives and link them to a point system. This point system can be recognized in the form of Amazon.com points (good toward the purchase of merchandise), time off from work, or any other creative incentive that you can think of.

Tip #75

Design a training "passport" and encourage participants to earn visas. The more they go online and learn, the more visas they receive. They can then get entered in a drawing to win a prize.

Tip #76

Prepare an online game (e.g. a scavenger hunt) for the participants to complete before coming to the online session. Give small prizes as incentives for completion. This will motivate them to become familiar with the technology and content that will be covered during the online learning session.

Tip #77

Publish your participants' accomplishments in a public place so that others in the organization know of their success. Verbal and written kudos can be just as effective a motivator as being awarded a physical prize.

Tip #78

Use games during your class as a part of your incentive plan. Link class attendance to more opportunities to win. Offer a free homework pass or additional rewards just for coming to class.

Tip #79

Offer choices as rewards to your participants. Let them be able to choose how they would like to receive their incentive.

Tip #80

Use visual reinforcements, including emoticons and slides, during class sessions. Use emoticons liberally while participants are speaking to indicate that you are listening and support what they are saying. Have "hidden" slides at the ready that say "Good Job" or "Great Work!"

Success Stories

Publishing success stories about online learning in your organization is a great way to reassure tentative new participants that they can be successful learning online. Use the success stories to supplement your marketing effort.

Tip #81

Pilot your program and make appropriate or necessary changes. Use the results of the pilot program as a published success story of what worked and how new improvements have enhanced the course. Publish results in the company newsletter, send a special email, or just post them around the water cooler area.

Tip #82

Write "stories" with real responses from real participants. Be creative and sprinkle these comments in your publications about the online learning initiative.

Tip #83

Follow up with your participants about a month after the course is over and all work has been submitted. Evaluate the transfer of learning that is taking place, and publish successful learning transfers throughout the organization.

Tip #84

Look to other divisions of your company or even to entirely different industries and organizations for successful stories. Use their successes as examples of how online learning can benefit your own organization.

Tip #85

Offer to speak at industry events and professional organizations about the success of your online learning initiative. This will enhance the reputation of your organization as a thought leader in the online learning arena. People are naturally attracted to work at, or stay with, organizations that are deemed to be the best of the best.

Tip #86

In your chosen communication medium, highlight participants who are surpassing expectations. Interview them to illustrate to others how the course has assisted them in their work. Also, include a contact option (extension, email address) so that future interested participants can ask additional questions.

Tip #87

Develop a mentor program by asking participants from the first round of successful courses to mentor or coach future participants.

Tip #88

Be sure to link all success stories to the company mission statement, performance policies, and professional development procedures. Highlight the improvements in areas that have been affected by the online learning initiative.

Tip #89

Use individual success stories as a tool to track achievement. For example, publish an individual follow-up story after a year that highlights "Here is XX now" and illustrate how the training has impacted the person's professional career. To see a success story, visit: <http://insynctraining.com/Insync/newsletter/>. Link to any of the listed newsletters and look for the "Professional Spotlight" of the month.

Tip #90

Ensure facilitators are advocates that have exposure to more than online participants. When they are delivering face-to-face programs or interacting with other parts of the organization, make sure they "talk-up" the successes they are experiencing in the online environment.

Design for Learner Success

Nothing succeeds like success! Give participants the opportunity to be successful and they will come back again and again. Do your best to create effective online learning environments, strong support systems, and well-designed programs.

Tip #91

Engaging materials are integral to keeping the participant motivated. Slides need to be visually appealing and the script needs to be designed to keep the learner engaged audibly.

Tip #92

An involved facilitator creates an environment that is participant centered, takes the focus off of the technology and the facilitator, and moves the focus to the content and the participants.

Tip #93

Individuals are motivated to learn things that they have a need to apply immediately. Be sure to explicitly state the need in the marketing materials and the introduction to the course so it is readily apparent to the participants how the content will positively impact their work.

Tip #94

The online learning environment can be isolating and distracting. A monotone lecture or a tedious reading assignment (no matter how important the content) can quickly lose the interest of your audience. Planned-for changes in pace and activities helps to alleviate the tedium.

Tip #95

Use a variety of instructional methods to provide variety. This includes the online classroom, discussion boards, tutorials, traditional classroom, and independent assignments to appeal to multiple learning styles and reinforce learning points.

Tip #96

Include a variety of hands-on activities and peer feedback. These help to immediately inform participants of their levels of success.

Tip #97

Peer pressure and peer support are integral to a successful online learning experience, so design exercises that encourage these types of interactions. When participants know they will be called on to collaborate with one another, they will be more engaged throughout the entire program.

Tip #98

Remember that there are a variety of online tools available to you in building on the content delivered via slides, reading, or tutorials. Using a variety of online learning tools and methods, including small group activities, self-paced exercises, and synchronous events, will stimulate participants' thoughts and creativity during class.

Tip #99

During live online classes, use a Producer to support participants with technical questions and to provide continuous encouragement to your participants. This leaves the facilitator free to focus on content and activity management.

Tip #100

Many times a participant will be the only person at a location who is taking a particular course. When this happens, a person can quickly feel isolated and believe that no one will notice or care if they have missed a class. To alleviate this problem, facilitators need to invest more time providing support and encouragement to participants than they would in a traditional class.

Tip #101

If you need help implementing an online learning motivation plan in your organization, please contact us at:
info@insynctraining.com.



<http://www.insynctraining.com>

Our "Synchronous Learning Expert" programs include:

- Learn How To Learn Online
- Synchronous Trainer's Survival School
- Synchronous Facilitator Certificate
- Synchronous Design Certificate
- Certified Synchronous Learning Expert

To register for any of our programs, browse to:

http://www.insynctraining.com/pages/pg_courses.htm

THANKS

We'd like to thank participants from our Synchronous Learning Expert (SLE) program for many of the contributions and suggestions contained in this booklet.

Questions about becoming a Synchronous Learning Expert?
Send your questions to info@insynctraining.com

