NRTC TIP SHEET

Designing Remote Group Training for Adults who are Blind or Have Low Vision: Research-Based Tips

This tip sheet is designed for service providers who provide instruction to adults who are blind or have low vision. It offers practical, research-informed guidance for planning and delivering effective remote group training.

The Case for Remote Group Training

Remote group training offers a flexible and inclusive way to deliver job readiness programs and other group training to adults who are blind or have low vision. Videoconferencing platforms like Zoom allow service providers to reach participants who may face transportation, geographic, or scheduling barriers. However, successful implementation requires thoughtful planning, accessibility considerations, and skilled facilitation.

Mental Effort Matters

Remote learning can be more mentally demanding than in-person instruction, especially for people using assistive technology. It takes a lot of mental effort to navigate multiple windows, listen to instructions, and use assistive technology—all at once. This mental effort is called "cognitive load." When it's too high, it becomes harder to focus, learn, and remember. This tip sheet includes strategies to reduce that load and make learning more effective.

Insights from Research

This tip sheet is informed by a pilot study conducted by researchers from the National Research & Training Center on Blindness & Low Vision, which evaluated a 5-day job search skills training program delivered by two trainers via Zoom to a group of 12 blind and low vision adults (Cmar & Antonelli, 2024). Each day included a 2-hour group session, followed by a 2-hour break, then another 2-hour group session. The study demonstrated that such programs are not only feasible but are also highly acceptable to participants, with strong engagement, learning outcomes, and peer support—even in the face of initial technical challenges. Key findings include:

- **High attendance and engagement**: Most participants attended all sessions and reported feeling involved and supported.
- **Low mental effort**: Participants experienced low cognitive strain and high understanding of the content, as measured by cognitive load scales.
- **Effective group dynamics**: Trainers successfully fostered a positive, supportive group atmosphere, and participants naturally helped each other with technology.
- **Manageable technical challenges:** Most issues occurred on the first day and decreased over time as participants became more comfortable with the platform.
- **High satisfaction:** Participants rated the trainers, content, and virtual format very positively and offered constructive suggestions for future improvements.

These findings support the use of remote group training as a viable method for providing

employment-related instruction to adults who are blind or have low vision. The study focused on job search skills, but the insights and strategies in this document also apply to remote group instruction on other topics, such as independent living skills and adjustment to vision loss. While these strategies are ideal, we recognize that real-world constraints—like staff shortages, budget restrictions, and time limitations—can affect implementation. Prioritize what's most realistic for your team.

Designing for Accessibility

Keeping accessibility in mind from the start reduces unnecessary barriers to learning and helps all participants engage fully, supporting a smoother learning experience.

- **Use accessible materials:** Offer digital materials in multiple formats, ensure that electronic files have headings and alternative text, use simple layouts, and avoid scanned PDFs or image-based content. Check out our Accessibility Resources page for tips on creating accessible documents.
- **Share materials in advance:** Distribute handouts and other materials early via email, mail, flash drive, or cloud-based storage so participants can review them ahead of time.
- **Choose an accessible platform:** Select a user-friendly videoconferencing platform (e.g., Zoom) that works well with assistive technology and offers multiple ways to join, such as by phone or computer.
- **Support screen reader users:** Provide keyboard shortcuts for the videoconferencing platform in advance, give reminders of relevant keyboard shortcuts during sessions, and read aloud any shared notes and screen content.
- **Explore alternatives to complex features:** Consider using methods like virtual hand-raising, literal hand-raising, and verbal responses for interactive activities instead of more complicated tools like virtual polls. If using virtual polls, read the question, responses, and results aloud.
- **Follow best practices for deafblind participants:** If your group includes participants who are deafblind, review Zoom Video-Conferencing: Accessibility Practices for People who are DeafBlind from Helen Keller National Center for additional guidance.

Remember: Accessible design removes obstacles before they become barriers.

Equipping Your Training Team

A well-prepared training team is essential for providing smooth, engaging, and effective remote instruction. However, even experienced teams may face unexpected staffing or resource limitations, so flexibility is essential.

- **Identify staffing needs:** Consider factors like group size and the types of activities planned to determine the appropriate size and composition of the training team (e.g., the number of trainers and support staff).
- **Designate roles and responsibilities:** Divide up key tasks among training team members. For example, two trainers could lead the training, facilitate activities, and monitor the virtual chat. A moderator or other support staff might handle logistics, host the videoconferencing sessions, manage breakout rooms, and troubleshoot technical issues.
- **Choose skilled trainers:** Select trainers who demonstrate empathy, patience, and adaptability; have experience facilitating group training; and are familiar with screen reader navigation.

- **Include lived experience:** Whenever possible, involve at least one trainer who has lived experience of blindness or low vision.
- **Use a structured curriculum:** Provide trainers with a detailed curriculum or training manual that includes step-by-step instructions, time estimates for activities, session scripts, and discussion prompts to ensure consistency and clarity.
- **Plan for flexibility:** Ensure the curriculum or manual includes suggestions for tailoring the content and activities to meet the participants' needs and accommodate variability in their technology skills, such as providing additional examples or allowing more time for activities.
- **Rehearse the training:** Designate time to practice all aspects of the training using the videoconferencing platform.
- **Anticipate technical challenges:** Build in extra time for setup and troubleshooting, especially during the first few sessions.
- **Offer technical support:** Be prepared to provide real-time technical support throughout the training.

Remember: Effective training begins with a team that's ready to lead, support, and adapt.

Preparing Participants for Success

Helping participants get ready for the training can build confidence, reduce stress, and minimize technical issues.

- **Assess readiness:** Screen participants to make sure they have all prerequisite skills for the training, including the computer and assistive technology skills required to navigate the videoconferencing platform.
- **Determine accommodation needs:** Provide an opportunity for participants to request accommodations for the training ahead of time.
- **Confirm technology access:** Ensure participants have a reliable Internet connection, a computer or other device with audio and video capabilities, and any necessary assistive technology, such as screen readers, braille displays, or screen magnification software.
- **Provide necessary equipment:** Consider loaning webcams, headsets, and mobile hotspots to participants who need them, depending on available resources.
- **Offer a guided orientation session:** Host a live pre-training session to introduce participants to the videoconferencing platform and give them a chance to practice essential features like muting and unmuting, accessing the chat, and navigating breakout rooms.
- **Address common issues in advance:** Test participants' audio and video during the pre-training session, help them resolve issues, and share tips for troubleshooting future technical problems on their own.

Remember: When participants feel ready, they can focus on learning—not catching up.

Enhancing Learning and Managing Cognitive Load

Remote learning can be mentally demanding, especially for assistive technology users. Thoughtful planning can help participants process information and make learning more effective.

- **Simplify complex content:** Break information into manageable parts, use plain language, and provide clear, consistent instructions to reduce mental effort.

- **Minimize distractions:** Encourage participants to attend sessions from a quiet location, mute non-essential notifications, and close unnecessary computer files and programs to promote focused learning.
- **Break up sessions:** Divide content into short segments with regular breaks. For example, a 2-hour session might include one or two 5–10 minute breaks, depending on the needs of the group.
- **Repeat key points and instructions:** Reinforce important concepts throughout the training and repeat instructions before activities and breakout rooms to support retention.
- **Encourage reflection:** Build in plenty of opportunities for discussion and reflection to deepen understanding.
- **Monitor participant fatigue:** Watch for signs of inattention, tiredness, or confusion, and adjust pacing, instructions, or content as needed.

Remember: Less mental clutter means more room for learning and growth.

Creating a Supportive Learning Environment

A respectful, engaging group atmosphere helps participants feel comfortable and support each other throughout the training.

- **Establish ground rules:** Set expectations for respectful interactions, such as muting when not speaking, keeping cameras on, identifying oneself by name before speaking, and maintaining confidentiality.
- **Discourage multitasking:** Encourage participants to be present and focused during sessions to support positive group dynamics and learning.
- **Use icebreaker activities:** Start sessions with simple icebreakers to build rapport and encourage connection.
- **Encourage active participation:** Use breakout rooms, role-plays, group discussions, and other interactive activities to promote engagement and interaction.
- **Give everyone a chance to participate:** Call on participants by name and allow use of the virtual chat feature to ensure everyone has a voice.
- **Model supportive behavior:** Use active listening, encouragement, and positive feedback to set the tone for the group.
- **Foster peer support:** Encourage participants to help each other by offering suggestions, responding to each other's questions, and providing informal peer-to-peer technical support to build a collaborative environment.

Remember: Respect, encouragement, and connection turn a group into a learning community.

Key Takeaways

Remote group training for adults who are blind or have low vision is a practical and flexible method when designed with accessibility and engagement in mind. To make the most of this approach, focus on these core strategies:

- **Design with accessibility at the core:** Use accessible materials, choose an accessible videoconferencing platform, and provide materials ahead of time.
- **Build a strong training team:** Select qualified trainers, have clearly defined responsibilities,

use a structured curriculum with room for flexibility, and schedule time to practice.

- **Set participants up for success:** Screen for readiness, confirm access to technology, and offer a pre-training orientation session.
- **Support learning and reduce mental demands:** Simplify content, minimize distractions, provide breaks and time for reflection, reinforce key concepts, and watch for signs of fatigue.
- **Create a positive group atmosphere:** Set ground rules, promote active participation through interactive activities, model supportive behavior, and encourage peer support.

Finally, gathering participant feedback during and after the training can guide real-time adjustments and inform future adaptations to improve the quality and effectiveness of remote instruction. With thoughtful planning and skilled facilitation, remote group training can expand access, reduce barriers, and create meaningful learning experiences for adults who are blind or have low vision.

Learn More

For details about the research behind this tip sheet, see this article:

Cmar, J. L., & Antonelli, K. (2024). Feasibility and acceptability of implementing a job search intervention for adults with visual impairments via videoconferencing. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness, 118* (2), 85–97. https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X241234922

For more information about the job search skills training research project, visit the project overview page.

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