

Virtual, face-to-face or something in between? The changing landscape of humanitarian training

by Jeanette Dyson

In our last blog we talked [about the changes to humanitarian training and simulation exercises](#), that were necessitated by Covid-19 and subsequent lockdowns.

While this had a huge impact on many aid actors and their plans in the short term, the pandemic has undeniably accelerated the development of - and exposure to - new, technology-based, exercise delivery models.

As many countries begin to emerge from the harshest of restrictions, training departments and providers are beginning to look at the road ahead through a fresh perspective. How might we convert the wider

range of choices now available into a more adaptive, resilient and cost-effective training calendar?

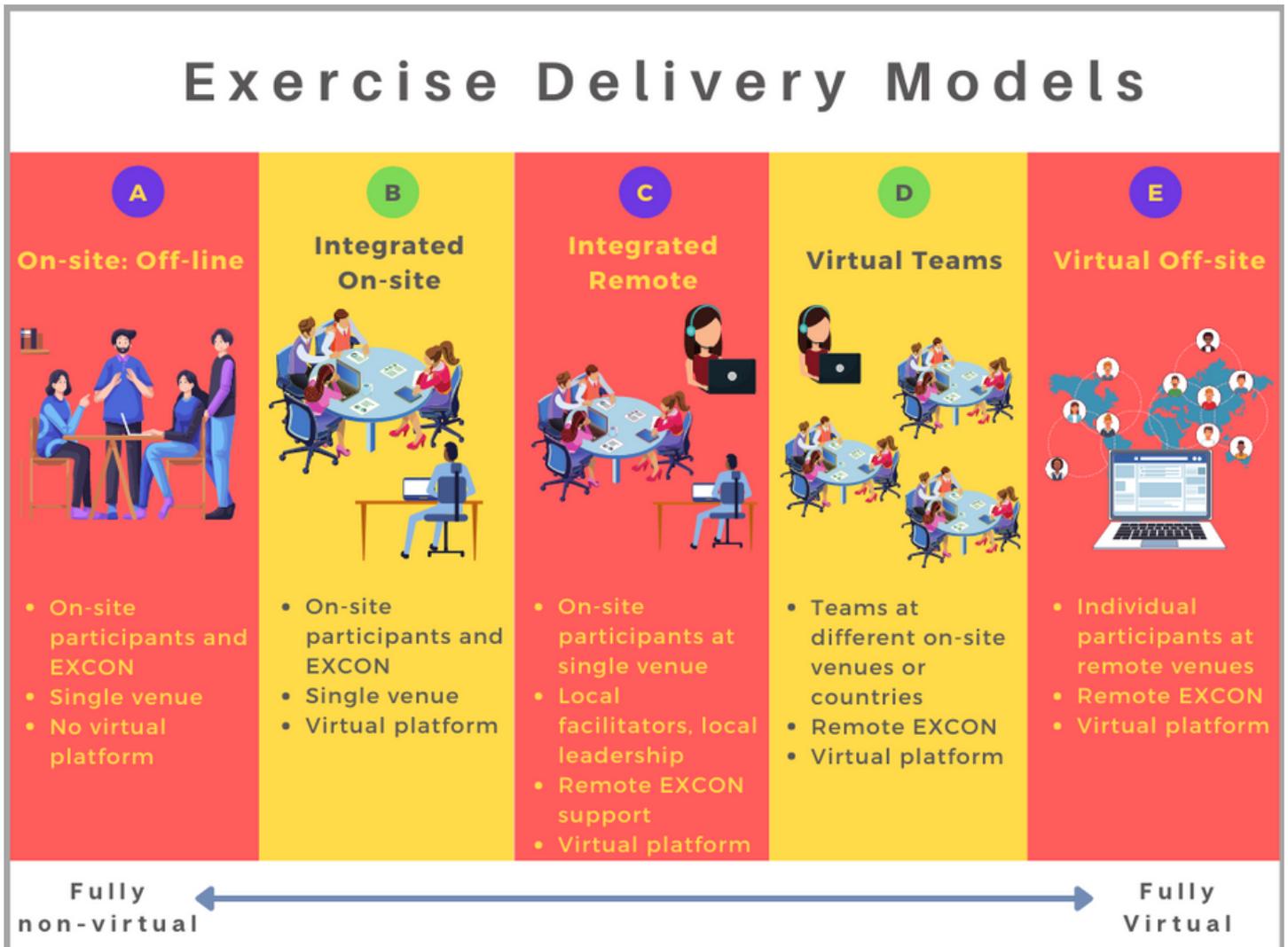
In this blog we identify five variations of simulation training and explore the pros and cons of each. By viewing these as a spectrum of options blended together within any given calendar year, each aid agency or network can benefit from a strategic approach tailored to its own needs.

At the same time, training organisers can enjoy greater certainty in the knowledge that other flexible solutions are possible should the situation dictate a change in plans or adjustments, even at short notice.

What are the exercise delivery options?

The rise of virtual, technology-based simulations has significantly expanded the range of training options in our collective armoury. Ranging from fully non-virtual to fully virtual, there are 5 distinct delivery models to select from, based on an aid organisation's strategic direction, resources and needs:

- A. On-site: Off-line B. Integrated On-site C. Integrated Remote D. Virtual Teams E. Virtual Off-site



A. On-site: Off-line



Traditionally, face-to-face simulations are the default setting for emergency response exercises and continue to be the comparative benchmark for all other options. One of the most common sentiments over the past 18 months has been *'The online training was useful, but off-line would have been better'*.

As, Rich Parker, Training In Aid founder, says: "In a post-COVID landscape, face-to-face on-site exercises without any virtual component will still provide excellent training outcomes and will retain their place in a comprehensive approach to calendar planning. The trick is to learn how to use them in a more targeted way than before, in instances where their value can be truly maximised and not return to viewing them as the only way of doing business."

Pros

- Maximises networking opportunities;
- Increased interpersonal interaction between participants and with trainers;
- Accelerates team cohesion and bonding;
- Can be combined with other induction or teambuilding activities;
- May extend to field settings and use of equipment;
- Enhanced degree of immersion.

Cons

- Limits the number of participants in a single exercise;
 - Requires significant logistical organisation;
 - Reliant on restrictions and conditions;
 - Increased carbon footprint;
 - Inefficient use of training staff;
 - Expensive.
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B. Integrated On-site:



Integrated on-site exercises take one through the spectrum, merging the benefits of face-to-face and virtual simulations. With this delivery model, exercise controllers plus the majority of participants are based on-site in the same physical location, but a virtual platform is incorporated into their interactions.

The integrated option can be used to enhance a face-to-face event by adding the realistic challenges of social media newsfeeds or other forms of digital communication and tools that an emergency response team would manage on operations. Using a shared virtual platform also allows training staff to involve extra participants who are unable to travel.

Pros

- All the benefits of on-site off-line exercises;
- Enhanced realism and practice with electronic communications and tools;
- Can increase the number of participants beyond those physically in attendance.

Cons

- Still requires significant logistical organisation;
- Still reliant on restrictions and conditions;
- Increased carbon footprint;
- Inefficient use of training staff;
- Expensive;
- Reliant on stable internet connectivity.

C. Integrated Remote:



The integrated remote option takes a significant stride towards localisation and represents an entirely new format for delivering simulation training for emergency response and preparedness.

In this model, participants plus local facilitators and observers are gathered on-site in the same physical location, however the virtual platform and other exercise control functions are supported remotely.

Staff at international headquarters level support in-country facilitators by handling the virtual components of the exercise and contributing with expertise behind the scenes through live email correspondence and playing other roles. By designing the simulation jointly with local counterparts, headquarters can ensure alignment of training content and methodologies over different times and places.

"It is exciting to think this option may become central within the international aid space. It empowers local and national entities to lead their own simulation training and manage the group dynamics in the room - yet without burdening them with the need for widespread tech expertise," says Rich. "Although still relatively new, the integrated remote solution has the potential to bring together the best of both worlds."



Pros

- All the benefits of integrated on-site exercises;
- Facilitates local leadership for exercise delivery;
- Joint design allows international stakeholders to align approaches between countries;
- Efficient use of training staff;
- Not reliant on restriction free international travel;
- Low carbon footprint;
- Enables local counterparts to tap into corporate subscriptions for tech platforms and tech support.

Cons

- Limits the number of participants in a single exercise;
- Still requires significant logistical organisation;
- Reliant on restrictions and conditions domestically for on-site gatherings;
- Reliant on stable internet connectivity.

D. Virtual Teams



Major humanitarian and emergency response operations rely on coordination between response teams coming from different places. These are mostly within an emergency-affected country but sometimes from outside. Until very recently, exercising these teams together meant travelling to a common location. The same challenges of physical co-location and travel costs applied to large international organisations looking to exercise several country or regional offices together within a single scenario.

The virtual teams model addresses this by enabling on-site simulations to occur with several international teams at the same time. Each team is physically located at an on-site venue within their own country or duty station, while connecting within a virtual exercise platform to teams based elsewhere. Overall exercise control and management of the virtual platform is coordinated remotely, with local facilitators embedded as on-site team observers at each location.

Pros

- The on-site element accelerates cohesion and bonding within teams;
- Can be combined with other induction or teambuilding activities;
- May extend to field settings and use of equipment at each on-site location;
- Enhanced degree of immersion;
- Efficient use of training staff;
- Offers huge uplift in number of participants;
- Not reliant on restriction free international travel;
- Low carbon footprint;
- Relatively inexpensive;
- Enables local counterparts to tap into corporate subscriptions for tech platforms and tech support.

Cons

- Fewer networking opportunities and interaction between teams;
- Still requires significant logistical organisation;
- Reliant on restrictions and conditions domestically for on-site gatherings;
- Reliant on stable internet connectivity.

E. Virtual Off-site



The quality and reach of virtual off-site simulation exercises were rapidly improved out of necessity to ensure continuity of training for aid organisations during the global pandemic. For some organisations, this option will continue to be an accepted model of cost-effective training in its own right. For all of us, it offers an effective solution of last resort when facing changes to restrictions that prevent on-site gatherings.

Providing they have internet connection, participants and exercise controllers can be located anywhere in the world. There are no requirements to travel and participants work in virtual team breakout rooms to complete exercise activities in real-time.

Pros

- Efficient use of training staff;
- Efficient use of participant time;
- Offers huge uplift in number of participants;
- Not reliant on restriction free international travel;
- No carbon footprint;
- Requires relatively low logistical effort to organise;
- The least expensive option;
- Can occur even in the context of high travel or meeting restrictions;
- Enables local counterparts to tap into corporate subscriptions for tech platforms and tech support.

Cons-

- Fewer networking opportunities and interaction;
- Reliant on stable internet connectivity;
- Reliant on individual tech proficiency and coaching with virtual platform to a higher degree than other options;
- If the technology fails during implementation, difficult to overcome.