

## Blended Training Model for Thai SMEs

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### Abstract

*This study used a qualitative approach to investigate the essential components of an effective and successful blended training model for SMEs. The research employed a mixed-method approach, including a literature review, training observation, and in-depth interviews with experts in the field to develop a framework. The study identified four key components that should be included in an effective blended training model: trainee characteristics, trainer characteristics, course design, and technology. This framework can be beneficial for government agencies seeking to design and implement effective training programs to support SME development in Thailand.*

**Keywords:** Blended Training, SMEs, Components

## INTRODUCTION

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are the backbone of Thailand's economy. They always play a key role as the driving force of economic growth in Thailand (Distanont and Khongmalai, 2021), with GDP worth 5,603,443 million baht in 2021, contributing up to 34.6 % of national income (GDP). However, according to the evaluation of Thai SMEs' growth opportunities and capacity index during 2020-2021 (OSMEP, 2022), micro-enterprises had a growth opportunity and capacity at a low level in terms of attributes for entrepreneurs which consists of knowledge and skills in financing and law, marketing, and administration; readiness to uncertain circumstances; and accessibility to useful information. This reflected that Thai SMEs still lack the knowledge and skills of entrepreneurs, and it led to low performance. Additionally, in recent years SMEs have faced various challenges that can affect their performance and growth, such as technologies that made rapid changes to production processes and business operations, the Covid-19 crisis that caused a profound impact on the economy; as well as increased intense competition from all around (Phekanonth, 2019).

In today's digital age, it's essential for businesses to embrace digital technologies and processes to meet the needs of customers and stay competitive. A lack of digital skills can be a barrier to SME performance and growth (Kij-itti, 2020; Sariwulan et al.; 2020; Klein & Todosco, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). In Thailand, SMEs have digital and technology skills at a low level, and no guidance for digital transformation for businesses. (OSMEP, 2020; Ratanabanchuen; 2022). They are not yet aware of the importance and benefit of digital technology. Most SMEs also lack human resources in ICT and digital technology, so they cannot compete with large businesses. and unable to access markets and sales channels. (Digital Government Development Agency (Public Organization & Bolliger & Company (Thailand) Ltd., 2021). This resulted in SMEs needing to find a solution to improve their capacity and increase their competitiveness. Prior studies have shown a positive and significant relationship between training and the performance of SMEs (Eshlaghy & Maatofi, 2011; International Labour Organization, 2014; Jha & Alam, 2021). Training facilitates SMEs to acquire new knowledge and skills, improve their capabilities or solve specific business problems (Li, et al, 2020), and can also enhance the survival rate of small businesses (Ibrahim & Ellis, 2003). However, SMEs with a small number of employees often have internal constraints in terms of organizing internal training to improve their capacity, mostly the time, human resources, and financial difficulties to invest in training (Oeusoonthornwattana et al., 2018; OECD, 2020). As a result, in Thailand, government agencies related to SME promotion and development have initiated a number of training programs, aiming to foster SME development (Osathanunkul, 2010).

Due to the outbreak of covid-19 along with the rise of digital transformation, Traditional face-to-face training is gradually being replaced by a new paradigm - blended training. It provides innovative instructional solutions by integrating traditional classroom training with online training activities, additionally combining various training methods and techniques. It's not a new method, was implemented in various interprofessional training programs due to its numerous advantages, as evidenced by prior research studies (Kupetz & Ziegenmeyer, 2005; Snowden, 2009; Lotrecchiano, 2013; Akarawang, 2016; Le & Pham, 2021; Ma et al., 2022), as well as in training programs for SME entrepreneurs (Tzikopoulos, 2012; Hamburg, 2015), but the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated its adoption and increased its significance. In Thailand, the government has continuously developed SMEs through various forms of blended training programs. However, the effectiveness and success of the training programs organized by different organizations have varied.

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Based on previous studies, there are various factors that can influence the success of blended training. Dillon and Gunawardena (1995) noted that the success of learning via technology can be affected by factors such as technology, instructors, curriculum, learners, and peers. A recent study conducted by Dewi et al (2018) identified five success factors of blended learning: (1) infrastructure, (2) IT, content, and learning process, (3) teacher, learner, and information system management, (4) support, and (5) attitude. Meanwhile, Yusof (2012) found that a trainee's characteristics, the design of the training program, and the work environment facilitating the effective transfer of training, are significant factors that can impact the transfer of training. He suggested that the content of the training program should be related to the staff's duties to facilitate their application of the learned knowledge and skills to their jobs. The literature demonstrates that effective blended learning is impacted by a range of diverse factors. Therefore, it is interesting to investigate the critical components of blended training specifically tailored for SMEs to develop a suitable blended training program. The research contributes to the body of knowledge on effective training for SMEs. It has resulted in a framework for designing and implementing an effective training program, which can be beneficial for government agencies involved in promoting and developing SMEs in Thailand.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Blended learning has been defined in various ways, but it is widely recognized as a learning approach that combines traditional face-to-face instruction with online or digital learning methods. (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Bliuc, Goodyear & Ellis, 2007; Chew, 2010; Boelens et al., 2015; Van Laer & Elen, 2020), while others focus on the combination of various instructional methods and techniques (Driscoll, 2002; Klaisang, 2020). Dziuban et al. (2004) stated that learning is a shift from traditional lecture-based instruction by promoting increased interaction between learners and the instructor by integrating technology with various classroom-based learning strategies to support and enhance learning outcomes, whereas Batista-Toledo & Gavilan, 2022 proposed blended learning become a process that involves acquiring knowledge, skills, and techniques through a combination of face-to-face, computer-based, distance, and mobile learning. Norberg et al. (2011) focused on time-based strategies and proposed the blended learning model that combines synchronous and asynchronous learning activities, including a variety of components such as face-to-face meetings, audio/video conference meetings, online chat, webinars, book reading, recorded lectures, Learning Management Systems (LMS), and Open Educational Resources (OER). While there are various definitions of blended learning, they all share the goal of optimizing the advantages of both delivery platforms and facilitating more effective learning experiences that lead to the desired outcomes.

According to Treesong et al. (2018), blended learning comprises four main components, namely: (1) personnel, which includes trainers and trainees, with the former being experts who provide guidance and assistance throughout the training process and serve as learning leaders; (2) content and activities, which consist of the topics covered, problem-solving exercises, and blended activities conducted both face-to-face and online; (3) learning resources, which encompass tools, training venues, and facilities that must be properly prepared to ensure smooth and efficient execution of the activities in line with the stated objectives; and (4) evaluation, which is essential to determine whether the training has met its goals and objectives, and to use the data collected to enhance the training process. While Wang, Han & Yang (2015) provided an overview of the essential components of blended learning theory through a comprehensive review of previous research. The proposed model consists of six critical subsystems, namely learner, teacher, technology, content, institution that provides support and infrastructure, and learning support, and all of these subsystems are related and connected.

One of the main reasons people resist new systems is the fear of new technology because they do not know how to use it, and lack the experience or necessary skills to use it, leading to a lack of confidence in using the new system. Therefore, learners' previous experience, ability to learn and skills related to work are considered important factors that contribute to the success of using technology. Harfoushi and Obiedat (2011) found that if trainees have the necessary skills or have experience in using the system or technology before, it will reduce fear of new technology and result in less resistance to a new training format that requires technology use, and they will be more willing to participate. If they are confident in their technology skills, they are more likely to put more effort into a blended course that utilizes computers as an online learning medium. According to Lin (2013), Learners who possess a strong

absorptive capacity for technology-mediated learning tend to use this approach to acquire new knowledge.

The role of instructors has evolved into a blend of an instructor who emphasizes instruction and a facilitator who motivates and guides their learners. Khair (2013) stated that a trainer should be knowledgeable and capable of keeping the training session engaging until the end. Locatis et al. (2016) highlighted the importance of the presenter's personality, interactivity, and teaching style for blended training using videoconferencing. Additionally, the level of responsiveness and communication of the instructor is a crucial factor that can stimulate the learning of learners in a blended learning environment. The prompt response of the instructor helps to support learners to recognize the benefits of blended learning (Ghazal et al. 2018; Sun et al., 2008).

The design of the course has an impact on learners' choice to participate and engage in blended learning. Whether blended learning can achieve good teaching outcomes depends on how the course is designed. A well-designed course can attract learners to participate in blended learning (Zhang, 2020), and can improve students' learning experiences by facilitating their acquisition of knowledge and skills (Brophy, 2000). In addition, the learner's ability to remember and apply knowledge learned is affected by the design of training that includes variables such as learning principles, sequencing, and content (Loureiro and Alves, 2019). The study by Hidayati (2021) also suggested that the quality of content design has a positive impact on the level of learning outcomes. Lim and Morris (2009) discovered that the relevance of learning content is a critical factor in instructional design for sustaining students' learning interest and increasing learning outcomes during blended instruction.

The availability and reliability of the infrastructure referring to the physical and technical resources, such as computer hardware, software, network connections, and other technical equipment, can impact the effectiveness of training activities that rely on technology, such as online courses or computer-based learning modules (Laily et al., 2013; Porter et al. 2014; Chen et al, 2022; Duggal, 2022). If the hardware and software used for blended learning are not adequate or compatible with each other, and the internet speed is not stable or fast enough, these issues could pose a significant challenge to managing and delivering effective blended learning experiences. (Chen, 2009; Asunka, 2017). In addition, in a blended learning setting, it is crucial to ensure that adequate technical support is made available for the optimal use of technology in both the onsite and online modes.

## **METHODOLOGY**

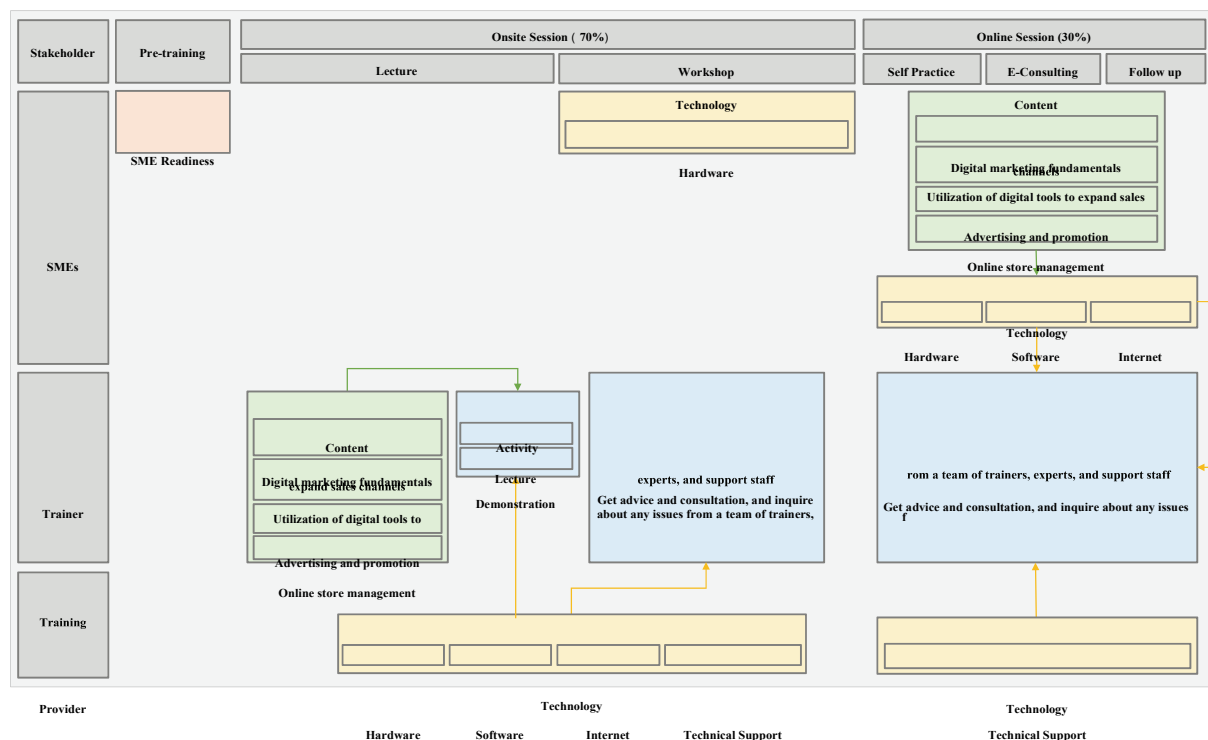
This study employs a qualitative research methodology, which involves reviewing theoretical concepts and prior research studies concerning blended learning and training to gain an understanding of the blended learning approach in training, and also important components of blended training. In addition, the researchers observed the digital marketing training program for SME entrepreneurs jointly organized by the Office of Small and Medium Enterprises Promotion (OSMEP) and Thammasat University (TU), which was conducted in a blended format including both face-to-face and online training sessions. The aim of the observation was to gain insights into the training process and the efficacy of the training techniques, also identify factors affecting the success of training programs organized by government agencies, and use this information to develop a blended training model for SMEs. In order to verify and validate the factors and components identified and explore the relationships between them, in-depth expert interviews are conducted with five experts, consisting of two experts in SME development, one

expert in human resource development, and one expert in using digital tools to enhance business marketing.

## RESULTS

Based on a review of relevant theoretical concepts and prior research studies related to the blended learning approach in training and components of blended training, the observation of the training program jointly organized by OSMEP and TU in-depth expert interviews, as well as the in-depth expert interview, the study has yielded valuable insights that can be used to analyze and identify the process of blended training for SMEs, as shown in Picture 1.

**Picture 1: Process of Blended Training for SMEs**



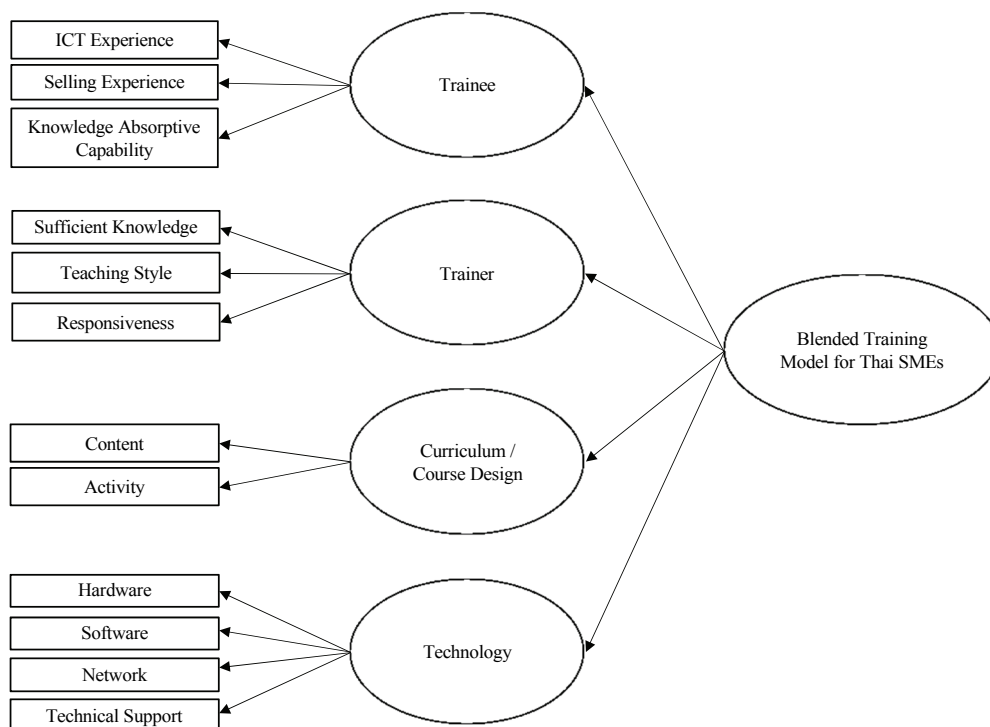
There are three stakeholders involved in the training process: trainees, trainers, and a training provider which refers to a government agency. The SME training program employs a blended learning approach that consists of two sessions, an onsite session and an online session. The program incorporates digital technology into its training modules, thus requiring trainees to possess a certain level of ICT proficiency and relevant job experience prior to enrollment. This prerequisite is necessary to ensure that participants are adequately prepared and equipped to derive maximum benefits from the training program.

The onsite training session is divided into two sub-sessions: lecture and workshop. During the lecture phase, trainers deliver content through lectures and demonstrations, enabling trainees to have a basic understanding of the content and guidelines for applying the acquired knowledge in the following workshop. In the workshop phase, trainees apply what they have learned in the previous phase by practicing on their own with support and assistance from trainers and support staff. In the onsite training session, trainees will be expected to utilize digital technology as a part of their learning. Therefore, the training provider needs to facilitate convenience related to technology, such as hardware, software, internet, and technical support to ensure a smooth and effective training process. This is essential for achieving the goals set for the training program.

The online session is divided into three sub-sessions: self-paced practice, e-consulting, and follow-up. The self-paced practice session will involve self-paced learning, where learners can access a set of online learning resources that cover in-depth information on the topic covered in the onsite session on the social media platform and apply the knowledge and skills gained to their actual work. After completing the self-paced practice session, learners will participate in e-consulting session with experts in the field. This session takes place via video conferencing tools. During this session, trainees can ask questions, discuss specific topics in-depth, and receive personalized feedback and advice from the experts. Following the e-consulting sessions, learners will receive ongoing support and guidance from trainers and support staff. This includes access to a 24-hour online chat room for inquiries of any issues and personalized feedback. The trainers and support staff will be available to answer any questions and provide additional guidance throughout the training process. The combination of two training sessions will help to ensure that trainees have a comprehensive understanding of the topics and can apply their knowledge effectively in real-world situations.

Based on the blended training process presented in Picture 1, a conceptual model for blended training for SMEs can be developed, as shown in Picture 2.

**Picture 2: Proposed Conceptual Model of Blended Training for SMEs**



The conceptual model involves personnel, course, and technology. The success of blended training depends on a variety of factors, including trainee characteristics, trainer characteristics, course design, and technology. Trainee characteristics are an important factor and encompass the ability and prior experience of trainees, including information technology experience, sales experience, and capacity to absorb knowledge. The trainer characteristics in facilitating knowledge transfer are also critical, including the trainer's sufficient knowledge of the topic matter, a teaching style that promotes interaction among trainees and their engagement, and responsiveness to trainees. Course design is another factor, and involves the development of content and activities that are appropriately designed to facilitate

learning. Finally, the technology factor refers to the availability and functionality of infrastructure, including hardware, software, internet connectivity, and technical support.

## SUGGESTION

The blended training conceptual model that has been developed can serve as an empirical framework to conduct a study aimed at analyzing the impact of each factor on the formulation of training design guidelines for SMEs, to provide SMEs with the necessary digital technology skills and enhance their digital marketing capabilities, leading to increased competitiveness in the digital era.

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