

# **LEARNING ON-LINE: BENEFITS AND PITFALLS OF E-LEARNING**

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You have 3500 employees in 70 locations. You're introducing a new sales training program. You need to train 2500 of these employees pronto. How can you possibly get it all done?

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You've been conducting employee orientation on a regular monthly basis for several years. With turnover remaining constant you really don't see an end in sight soon. It wouldn't be so bad if you could just use the same material from month to month, but it seems that you're constantly adding, updating and changing the information. Isn't there a better way?

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Training costs and training demand are increasing exponentially. As employers compete for an ever-shrinking number of skilled workers, and as "free time" becomes increasingly precious, alternatives to traditional training and education have become more necessity than luxury. And, luckily, as bandwidth becomes less of a scarce resource and more and more companies are becoming "networked," the move to training using Internet, intranet or extranet technology is a growing option.

E-learning or "electronic learning" is the delivery of training or instruction through various forms of electronic technologies. E-learning options combine multiple media techniques including streaming audio or video, CD-ROM, PowerPoint presentations, Internet interaction via links to additional information, animation, etc.

The ability of Internet technology to "push" information to anyone — anywhere — means substantially increased efficiencies in delivering training programs to employees who may be scattered around the globe.

E-learning allows HR departments to offer a multitude of courses and materials available through the employee's computer desktop. The employee can select from a list of courses and review material at their convenience — and at their own pace. When the course or lesson is completed, the program may include a quiz or learning assessment tool. Once completed, the employees receive "credit" for the training.

ASTD's (American Society for Training and Development) State of the Industry Report 2001 found that the percentage of organizations using the Internet for training purposes grew from 3 percent in 1996 to 38 percent in 1999. For intranets, the rate of growth was even higher - from 3.5 percent to nearly 40 percent. The U.S. Department of Education

indicates that 84 percent of two- and four-year colleges in the United States expect to offer distance learning courses in 2002 - compared to 58 percent in 1998.

## **Should You Consider Internet-Based Training?**

What are the benefits of online learning? According to those who have "been there, done that," they include saving money on training, including reduced travel costs and employee time away from the office; more convenient access to "just-in-time" training and information and the ability to easily and inexpensively update information so that it is immediately accessible to any number of employees in any number of locations.

Employees can be in a virtual classroom environment at their convenience. They can be participating with a "group," yet doing so independently. E-learning offers:

- Consistency in content/delivery - no instructor variation. Once a program has been purchased or developed you can be assured that employees are receiving the same information, in the same way.
- Faster delivery of time-sensitive information. Live training programs can take time, especially when the schedules of many employees need to be adjusted to accommodate time out of the office. E-learning offers the ability to train a multitude of employees quickly and conveniently.
- Broader access to recognized experts and authorities. With traditional training programs only a small percentage of employees were able to take advantage of high-level training opportunities and access to experts in various fields. E-learning offers broader access at substantially reduced cost.
- Greater productivity. When employees don't have to leave the workplace to receive training, the organization benefits from increased productivity.
- Access to "just-in-time" information when it's needed.
- Cost savings. Once the infrastructure is in place to delivery content electronically, the marginal cost of providing training to additional employees is minimal.

Employees benefit as well. E-learning allows employees to learn "on demand" without having to leave the office or be away from home while traveling to training or conferences.

Employees can take courses at home, at work or while traveling and they can benefit from information available through a greater variety of sources.

## **Barriers to Implementing Internet-based Training**

The benefits are obvious — the possibilities seem endless. So what's to keep you from moving toward e-learning?

### ***Computer Systems***

The primary barrier to instituting an internet-based training process is your existing computer system and system support. To deliver e-learning most effectively companies

need sufficient bandwidth and server space. Smaller companies with limited resources may not have the wherewithal to purchase these resources. One solution may be outsourcing the program through an ASP (application service provider) or consultant/vendor that can provide hosting, delivery, scheduling and tracking of training modules.

### *Varying learning preferences*

E-learning is not for everyone. Adult learners are diverse in their training needs and preferences and HR departments need to be cognizant of this fact and willing/able to accommodate different learning styles.

### *Content*

Some topics are simply not suitable for online learning. Classes on customer service, for instance, may require live interaction for the best delivery. Selecting content is critical and you need to carefully consider whether this is the proper mode to deliver the type of information you need to convey

### *Ease of use*

Not all programs are created equal. Always preview any training program you plan to provide to ensure that it meets your company's needs - and the abilities of your staff.

### *High tech vs. high touch*

While e-learning can be efficient and cost-effective it does not deliver the same quality of "high touch" that traditional training programs do.

## **Maximizing Effectiveness of E-Learning in Your Organization**

E-learning systems and techniques vary among companies. Unfortunately there are no "canned" approaches that will work for every organization. As with any other initiative, your first step should be to determine your own objectives. What do you want to accomplish? And, just as with any other initiative, support from the top of your organization is critical to the success of e-learning. You'll want to make sure that your CEO, top management and middle managers are on-board with the concept and understand the pros and cons as well as your company's approach and goals so they can help to support and promote the program to employees.

One key point you'll want to make with management and employees is that you do not intend e-learning to substitute for face-to-face learning. There will still be times and topics that necessitate traditional training delivery methods. E-learning is simply — and substantially — an alternative delivery mechanism that can provide tremendous benefits in terms of accessibility and reach.

It's important that your goals are tied to your selected delivery mechanisms. E-learning, as we've seen, can incorporate a wide variety of training approaches — from interaction to static delivery. Don't fall into the trap of using one approach exclusively. Make sure that your delivery methods are driven by your learning objectives.

Next, you'll need to work with your Information Systems department or computer experts to determine how your existing systems will accommodate e-learning and what, if any, additional investments you may need to make. If you don't have the internal resources necessary to make an e-learning program a reality you will need to explore the services available through external vendors.

The Internet is a good starting point to generate names of potential vendors. Industry trade publications like *HR Magazine*, *Training*, etc. can also be good sources of names - find out which vendors are advertising their services and what they have to offer. Then call on your SHRM colleagues for input and opinions, many may already have experience with various vendors and solutions and will be glad to share information or point you in the right direction.

Evaluate costs carefully. Technology isn't always the answer. While e-learning can provide a number of benefits for both companies and employees, it is not always the most cost-effective solution.

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