TRAINING 101

The Trainer's Ally

E-learning doesn't
mean any harm.
It just wants to help.

By Patrick von Schlag

Solve this training and development riddle: What do some t&d professionals view as both an opportunity and a threat? The answer: e-learning.

While some trainers view it as preying upon their insecurities, others understand that e-learning is a tool to help learners gain a comprehensive knowledge of a specific field—an elusive task due to rapid product development and evolution. As a result, those trainers realize that learning needs to be a tacti-cal process that enables employees to get information in a just-in-time, just-enough, and just-for-me format. To that end, t&d professionals must adapt their instructional approach to help people learn and retain information as quickly, conveniently, and effectively as possible.

E-learning makes that change possible by improving learner access to training, providing just-the-right training to learners with heterogeneous backgrounds, and helping t&d professionals

get training out in a more timely fashion to the people who need it. Thus, an effectively developed e-learning initiative is the trainer's ally in helping employees gain the knowledge they need to perform. Some organizations, however, still hesitate to implement an e-learning initiative. If your organization is one of them, here are a few suggestions on how to start up the e-learning discussion.

Identify winners

Your first step is to perform an analysis to reveal the people who stand to benefit from an e-learning initiative.

Unserved users. Despite recent events, employees in many companies still travel to traditional classroom training that searchable components allow instructors to provide learners with only the chunks of information they need, in a fraction of the time of traditional training.

Time-challenged users. Requirements such as consistent times and dates for classroom programs exist due to availability of instructors, classrooms, equipment, and learners. Yet, the idea of being away from the office for one, three, or five consecutive days is inconsistent with most people's job requirements. With e-learning, however, learning gets integrated into your overall work. Learning becomes far less event-based and more of a continuous process that opens up training, especially in smaller organizations, to people who can't leave work.

mation transfer so that they can focus on more interesting and relevant issues with individual learners.

Training and business managers. One challenge that management continues to face is how to ensure that their employees have the skills they need to do their work well and help the company prosper. It has been difficult, especially for large companies with people in many locations, to ascertain the required skills and ensure consistent, effective training. E-learning provides the consistency that a classroom can't. That's why it's critical that e-learning content and instruction be consistently good. Managers will support high-quality e-learning programs but distrust ones whose primary benefit is cost savings.

Finance. E-learning can save money. To gain the buy-in you want, you'll be expected to show cost savings. But be sure that your primary objectives are designed with other internal customers in mind. If you serve those customers well, the results will take care of your CFO.

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takes place in a few centralized locations. That creates two user groups: the geographically blessed—users who work in the right location to have relatively open access to training—and the unblessed, users for whom training is a major disruption involving substantial time, travel, and cost. E-learning levels the playing field between the geographically blessed and unblessed.

Overserved users. As stewards of learning, instructors must make the best use of employees' time and teach them the required job competencies. Good instructors acknowledge that some learners will have been exposed previously to significant parts of the course material. E-learning's prescriptive assessments and

Talented instructors. Good classroom training programs—for example, behavior-based programs such as Internet-working or leadership development—will always be in high demand. The number of capable, talented instructors, however, is limited. Leveraging technologies (such as virtual classrooms) enables organizations to provide more learners access to the most talented, experienced, and effective instructors.

E-learning programs also provide a new role opportunity for instructors: mentor. Trainers can work one-on-one, in small groups, or over the Web or telephone to help learners assimilate and apply learning effectively. That role frees trainers from spending time on infor-

Next steps

Gather a sampling of the potential winners. When approaching managers, target those who

● have a large number of employees in disparate locations (sales, for example)

● have the highest training bills

● are consistent supporters of training but lack the budget to send as many employees to training as they'd like.

Build user support by describing the new training programs that would be available, the career benefits, and how you need their help to make it happen. Working together, create a strategy that blends e-learning into the existing training program.

After you've gotten the winners on

board, identify pilot opportunities:
● Is there a pocket of your organization that never receives training?
● Are there IT experts who won't go to class because "they know it all already"?
● Is your HR department looking for noncash ways to reward employees for their loyalty during the economic downturn?

Outline specific needs (and wants) for training. Focus on win-win opportunities in which you're solving a significant problem for employees.

Don't feel that the solution you recommend has to be 100 percent e-learning. You can use e-learning as an effective tool to make your classroom training more productive. For example, classroom training is least productive when not everyone in the class has the necessary prerequisite skills. Stopping to address the needs of inexperienced or underqualified learners is aggravating for trainers. Leverage e-learning, and you can provide (and possibly use assessment to enforce) prerequisite skills training—making time in the classroom more productive.

Because e-learning requires changing learning processes, it may take some coaching before people get used to it. Use these tips to get your organization excited about the possibilities of e-learning. Then, you can start figuring out how to pay for the pilot.

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