

www. online. learning

Listen to the sounds of people learning: *Click. Keystrokes. Click-click. Tab.* It's not the next big thing; it's the now big thing. But you've heard the hype. How do you really get a handle on online learning opportunities?

You've never had more online training options. You can use the Internet to learn PowerPoint software, earn college degrees, prepare for computer certifications, fine-tune your coaching skills, and gear up for new careers. You can access corporate learning sites, cyber universities, government hubs, and publication-sponsored learning centers. In fact, there are way too many options for one person to check out.

Online learning is not a fad, and it's not for the lazy. You can't log on to a Website a few times and expect to receive a completion certificate. Online learning requires high commitment but offers high flexibility: You can often learn on your own time, at your own pace, and in your own space. And it sure beats a weekly commute to class or three days on the road for a one-day course.

You can get a quick, painless feel for how learning sites work online; most offer free demos and course samples. Take a look. Wired courses range from straight book-to-screen text to live, interactive learning forums with video. You can also find asynchronous lectures, discussions with subject matter experts, online tests and assessments, message forums, audio files, and online libraries. Streaming video interactivity will improve as the bits-and-bytes lanes expand, but don't let current technology keep you offline.

One trend that makes online learning options difficult to monitor is the alliance

Online learning is good news
for smart trainers and free agent
learners. But where to begin?
Here's some just-in-time help and
a sampling of sites to rescue you
from information overload.

By Donna J. Abernathy

and acquisition fever that has poured over from Wall Street. But on the plus side, consolidation is elevating overall course sophistication and narrowing choices. For example, Sylvan Learning Systems and MCI WorldCom joined forces to develop the Caliber Learning Network (www.caliberlearning.com). And California-based Yipinet (www.yipinet.com) has been gobbling up educational sites left and right in its quest for more additions to its Knowledge Hub.

Another issue to consider when selecting an online learning site is accreditation. According to Vicky Phillips and Cindy Yager, co-authors of *The Best Distance Learning Graduate Schools* (Random House, 1999), when you register with unaccredited online universities, the degree or credits you earn may not be recognized by other schools, employers, or colleagues. Accreditation in the United States generally originates from one of six regional accrediting agencies or from professional agencies such as the Distance Education and Training Council or the American Psychological Association. It

pays to decide beforehand whether accreditation is a must-have. Right now, Jones International University is the only online-only university to be accredited by one of the six U.S. regional boards, but look for more to follow suit.

To help you explore online learning opportunities, *T&D* offers on the following pages a guide to some commercial and academic sites open to individuals. It's just a sampling, folks; there are many more sources for online learning, and new ones appear weekly.

And don't miss Ten Questions to Ask About Online Learning Sites. □

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On the Horizon

Keep your sights on these newcomers. The Hungryminds.com cyberuniversity Website is gearing up for an autumn debut. According to *Business 2.0*, "With 50 employees, about \$4.5 million of his own money, and funding from five Reel.com angel investors, [Stuart] Skorman plans to spend \$30 million in the next year to transform the way we learn." And Knowledge Universe has invested heavily in Unext.com, which is "dedicated to building the first-ever online education enterprise focused on high quality education as it is created and taught in respected and distinguished educational institutions." Stay tuned.

Ten Questions to Ask About Online Learning Sites

Here's a starting point for your learning site explorations. All of the questions may not apply to you, but most will help you gather information about learning providers and their offerings.

1. What is the full cost of a course?

Additional costs may include student materials, software, books, mail support, interactive time with an instructor, phone support, or classroom access time.

You may be limited to a set number of weeks to complete the course. Find out how flexible the provider is with extending class time just in case other commitments arise.

2. What's the course length?

3. What are the instructor's qualifications?

Find out who your instructor is and what qualifications and certifications he or she holds. Also

find out how long the instructor has been teaching online and what other courses he or she has taught.

If you decide to take additional courses, determine whether there are any package deals for an entire curriculum or follow-up course discounts.

4. Does the provider offer a full curriculum?

5. When are interactive sessions offered?

Make sure that your schedule fits with the course's, and find out whether additional sessions are available if you miss scheduled sessions.

It's vital to have all of the software and plug-ins prior to the course startup and to determine whether there are any extra requirements or costs as the course progresses.

6. What software is included?

7. What laboratory systems are available for hands-on exercises, if needed?

Find out what hardware you need in order to complete any course lab exercises, such as servers for specialized computer training. If multiple systems are needed, find out whether the provider has accessible test systems on the Internet or if you must provide your own.

Ask the following: When the course is done, can you continue to email questions to the instructor? Is there a support mail account for past students?

Can you continue to attend interactive sessions for later questions? Is there a cost involved with any of those?

9. Are progress and completion reports available?

Determine whether you can monitor your learning progress and obtain course completion reports.

Understand the learning provider's guarantee and make sure that you're comfortable with it in case the training doesn't live up to expectations.

Adapted with permission from "Questions to Ask," Aris Corporation, aris.com

8. What follow-up support is available?

10. Is there a course guarantee?

See The Free Agent Learner's Source Guide on the next page.

The Free Agent Learner's Source Guide

WEBSITE AND CONTACT INFORMATION	SAMPLE ONLINE COURSE CONTENT	# OF ONLINE COURSES AVAILABLE	LEARNING TOOL HIGHLIGHTS	MINIMUM SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS*	COURSE PRICE RANGE** (US\$)	ACCREDITATION OR REGISTRATION	DEGREES, CREDITS, AND CERTIFICATES AVAILABLE
CATEGORY: BUSINESS SKILLS							
Colorado State University Network for Learning (CSUN) Fort Collins, Colorado URL: www.csun.colostate.edu Phone: 800.525.4950 Email: info@learn.colostate.edu Other course categories: computer skills, personal development	☐ Business ☐ Computer science ☐ Vocational education ☐ Noncredit courses	Varies by semester.	☐ Lecture video-tapes ☐ Online discussions ☐ Phone and Web access to instructors ☐ Books ☐ Email	486/100 PC (Pentium required for computer courses) or 68040 Macintosh, 16MB RAM (8MB for Macs), 8MB free HD space, color SVGA monitor. Extra: Emulanet software (download)	\$328 to \$384 per credit hour	☐ North Central Association of Colleges and Schools Mature Status (CSU) ☐ AACSB - the International Association for Management Education (CSUN M.B.A.)	Contact CSU.
Jones International University Englewood, Colorado URL: www.international.edu Phone: 303.784.8045 Email: info@international.edu Other course categories: technical and career skills, computer skills	☐ Business communications ☐ Internet in education ☐ Leadership skills ☐ Communication technologies	40+ Free online demo	☐ Class forums ☐ Online study groups ☐ Online testing ☐ Audio mini lectures ☐ Email	Pentium 133 PC, 16 MB RAM, VGA 256-color monitor. Free plug-ins available online.	\$600 to \$700 per three-credit course Licensing and group enrollment available.	North Central Association of Colleges and Schools	B.A. and M.A. (both in business communications) 18 certificates of specialization
UB Online WebMBA University of Baltimore, Maryland URL: ubonline.edu Phone: 877.277.5982 Email: webinfo@ubmail.ubalt.edu Other course categories: technical and career skills, personal development	☐ Business ☐ Marketing ☐ Global e-commerce ☐ Financial management	16 for the Web M.B.A.	☐ Electronic library ☐ Instructor-led online discussions ☐ Online team study ☐ Books ☐ Email	Email address that supports attachments, fax access, printer, VGA monitor, sound card, and Office 97 Suite	\$1,225 per three-credit course	AACSB - the International Association for Management Education (Web M.B.A.)	M.B.A.

University of Phoenix Online The Apollo Group, Phoenix URL: uophx.edu/online Phone: 800.765.4922 Email: Use online email form. Other course categories: computer skills, technical and career skills	☐ Business administration ☐ Nursing ☐ Computer information systems ☐ Education	Contact University of Phoenix.	☐ Electronic classroom forum ☐ Electronic library ☐ Online orientation ☐ Books ☐ Email	Pentium 75 PC, 32MB RAM, 1GB HD space, SVGA monitor, Windows 95 or 98, word-processing and spreadsheet software	From \$318 per credit hour	Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools	A.A., B.S., M.A., M.S., M.B.A., D.M.
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CATEGORY: CAREER AND TECHNICAL SKILLS

Financial Services University Princeton Learning Systems Princeton, New Jersey URL: fsu.org Phone: 800.867.9351 Email: steveh@yipinet.com Other course categories: business skills	☐ Municipal securities ☐ Retirement planning ☐ Estate planning ☐ Customer accounts	110+ Free online demo	☐ Online testing center ☐ Test feedback ☐ Course tracking and reporting ☐ Job postings ☐ Email	Contact Financial Services University for system requirements.	\$20-\$99	N/A	Certificate of completion
Science Learning Center Kelly Scientific Resources Troy, Michigan URL: www.kellyscientific.com Phone: 800.535.5662 Email: Use online email form. Other course categories: business skills, computer skills, personal development	☐ Information technology ☐ OSHA compliance ☐ Management skills ☐ Office skills	Contact Kelly Scientific Resources.	Contact Kelly Scientific Resources.	486/66 PC or MAC IIsi, enough HD space for plug-ins, sound card (some courses), Windows 95 or NT, or System 7. Plug-ins available online.	\$50 to \$495 for 90-99 day subscriptions	N/A	Contact Kelly Scientific Resources.

CATEGORY: COMPUTER SKILLS

Aris Online Education Aris Corporation Bellevue, Washington URL: aris.com Phone: 888.299.2850 Email: arisreg@aris.com Other course categories: technical and career skills	☐ Microsoft certification prep ☐ Oracle software ☐ Networking essentials	20+ Free sample course	☐ ArisLive! interactive sessions ☐ NetMeeting instructor office hours ☐ Message board ☐ Online quizzes ☐ Email	80486/33 PC, 16MB of RAM, 500MB hard drive, VGA resolution, 3.5-inch floppy drive, CD-ROM drive	\$160 to \$2,195, including course reading materials	N/A	Certificate of completion
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The Free Agent Learner's Source Guide

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CATEGORY: COMPUTER SKILLS							
DigitalThink San Francisco URL: digitalthink.com Phone: 415.437.2800 Email: info@digitalthink.com	☐ Programming ☐ Microsoft certification prep ☐ IT management ☐ Internet literacy	95+ Free sample course	☐ Online quizzes ☐ Tutor support ☐ Course tracking ☐ Email ☐ No books required.	N/A Works with any Web-connected computer, any platform; no plug-ins required.	\$45 to \$450	N/A	CEU
Other course categories: technical and career skills, personal development							
McGraw-Hill Online Learning New York URL: www.mhonlinelearning.com Phone: 800.598.4077 Email: lifetimelearning@mcgraw-hill.com	☐ Programming ☐ Microsoft certification prep ☐ Business skills ☐ Internet technology	20+ Free online course	☐ Discussion groups ☐ Online exams ☐ Self-assessments ☐ Books ☐ Email	Pentium-class PC, sound card, Windows 95 or Windows NT. Some courses require plug-ins and special software.	\$49 to \$495, some including learning materials	N/A	Certificate of completion
Other course categories: technical and career skills, personal development, business skills							
ZDU, ZD Education Rochester, New York URL: zdu.com Fax: 617.225.3605 Email: Use online email form.	☐ Programming ☐ Webmaster ☐ Databases ☐ Networking	130+ Free two-week trial	☐ ZDU resource library ☐ Instructor-led discussions ☐ Self-study ☐ Books ☐ Email	Pentium PC or Macintosh PowerPC, Windows 95, 98 or NT or MacOS 8	\$7.95 a month or \$69.95 a year subscriptions; corporate accounts available.	N/A	CEU, ZDU course completion certificates
Other course categories: technical and career skills							
CATEGORY: PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT							
Ninth House Learning Network San Francisco URL: www.ninthhouse.com Phone: 415.575.0950 Email: jamiec@ninthhouse.com	☐ Leadership ☐ Communication ☐ Team building ☐ Project management	Contact Ninth House. Free online video preview	☐ Simulations ☐ Games ☐ Video clips ☐ Tracking and evaluation ☐ Web communities	120 MHz PC, 16MB RAM, 20MB free HD space, video card, stereo sound card, 10MB ethernet adapters, Windows NT, 95, or 98	No cost for the Website content. Corporate subscription-based courses available.	N/A	N/A
Other course categories: business skills							

tutorials.com, White Plains, New York URL: tutorials.com Phone: 888.231.9327 (US) 303.231.9327 (international) Email: Use online email form.	☐ Webpage design ☐ HTML ☐ MCSE preparation ☐ Software skills	200+ Free online demo	☐ Pre- and post-assessment exams ☐ Interactive multimedia ☐ Built-in search engine	Pentium-class PC, 16MB RAM, audio device, Windows 95, 98, or NT, 7thStreet.com multimedia player (free download)	\$9.95 to \$839.95 (most less than \$50) Discounts available.	N/A	Certificate of completion
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Other course categories: technical and career skills, business skills

CATEGORY: MULTIPROVIDER SITES

America's Learning eXchange U.S. Department of Labor Washington, D.C. URL: alx.org Phone: 877.348.0502 Email: Use online email form.	☐ Information technology ☐ Public safety ☐ Marketing and sales ☐ Human resources development	Contact ALX about their large course database. Free online demos	Varies by course.	Varies by course and provider.	Varies by course and provider.	☐ ALX: N/A ☐ Learning providers: varies	Varies by course.
Distance Learning Channel Ed-X Austin, Texas URL: www.ed-x.com Phone: 888.419.0929 Email: staff@ed-x.com	☐ Internet education ☐ Workplace communication ☐ Business ☐ Educational technology	Contact Ed-X about their large course database.	Varies by course.	Varies by course and provider.	Varies by course and provider.	☐ Ed-X: N/A ☐ Learning providers: varies	Varies by course.
UOL Publishing McLean, Virginia URL: www.uol.com Phone: 800.915.9298 Email: info@uol.com	☐ Management ☐ Computer applications ☐ Business ☐ Human resources	Contact UOL about their large course database. Free online demos	Varies by course.	Varies by course and provider.	Varies by course and provider.	☐ UOL: N/A ☐ Learning providers: varies	Varies by course.

* In addition to a current browser, an Internet connection, email software, and a 28.8 baud or faster modem

** Prices are valid as of 7/99 and do not include books, supplies, or course options, unless stated. Contact the vendors for special corporate or series pricing.

Editor's note: This chart is based on a July 1999 survey of organizations that offer learning via the Internet. It does not include vendors that sell online learning software or delivery systems. It represents responses deemed relevant to the training community and is not a comprehensive listing of all online learning providers.