
The Opposite Sector

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D I S T A N C E L E A R N I N G A N D T H E F E D S

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Sharon Kelley, a training manager for the U.S. Forest Service in Goleta, California, needed training for her supervisors last year. So she reserved overnight rooms and meeting space at a local hotel, paid salaries and expenses for her supervisors to drive in from six neighboring forest districts, and paid instructors to fly in from metropolitan areas.

This year, Sharon pays no travel and hotel expenses at all. Both the supervisors and the instructors stay close to home. But the instruction still goes on.

At the same time, Sharon saves the government money. And the supervisors spend more time on the job. How?

Sharon's supervisors receive the training by satellite.

How does it work? Distance learning comes in a variety of flavors, both high- and low-tech. And more and more government agencies are getting into the picture; the Forest Service's satellite training for supervisors is only one example. Here are a few nonsatellite examples of distance-learning uses:

- ▶ The Office of Personnel Management offers courses by correspondence from its National Independent Study Center in Lakewood, Colorado.
- ▶ The Department of Defense Dependents Schools teach students on different continents via the Internet.
- ▶ Instructors at the General Accounting Office's Training Institute in

Washington, D.C., see and hear students in Seattle via fiber-optic lines.

▶ For more than two decades, the military services have been mailing instructions on computer disks, videodiscs, and CD-ROMs to service-people worldwide.

The form of distance learning that we'll focus on here is training by satellite—the kind of training Sharon Kelley uses at the Forest Service. It's cost-effective, it's possible even if your organization doesn't own a satellite dish, and it's available off-the-shelf today.

Here's how it works. The instructor drives to a local television studio and conducts the training in front of a camera. In other cities, government employees from each of the trainee sites walk or drive to a local conference room that has a large-screen television, a telephone, and perhaps a fax machine. The television is connected to a satellite dish.

The employees watch the program live. Then they discuss issues among themselves, talk by telephone to the instructor and perhaps to trainees at other agencies nationwide, and send in comments and questions by fax. Everybody stays in her or his home city.

Does it work? Research consistently shows that teletraining is at least as

A new quarterly column explores training in the government and nonprofit sectors. This edition: how the feds use teletraining to get the most from their (your) money.

Introducing "The Opposite Sector"

In *T&D's* new quarterly column, experts from the field will look at training and organization development in the government and nonprofit sectors. Send submissions to "The Opposite Sector," *Training & Development*, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22301-2043.

Meet

Clearinghouses for Teletraining Programs

The following clearinghouses can help you find programs and information for satellite training.

University of Missouri Satellite Educational Programming Guide. The extension service searches for relevant programs and lists them under several categories, including business and industry (business.asc), distance education (distance.asc), general interest (general.asc), higher and continuing education (higher.asc), professional development and training (professi.asc), and technology (technolo.asc).

For any of those documents, send a request over the Internet to almanac@ext.missouri.edu and include the following message: *send satguide [document-name]*, (for example, *send satguide business.asc*.)

To speak with a live person, call 314/882-2243 and ask for Jim Summers or Vivian Mason. Their Internet addresses are summersj@ext.missouri.edu and masonv@ext.missouri.edu.

Oregon State Satellite Program Calendar. This clearinghouse operates through an educational satellite system called ag*sat. To receive the list over the Internet, send your request to almanac@oes.orst.edu and include the message: *send ext sat-cal*. Call ag*sat at 402/472-7000; ask for Tricia Sis.

The mailing address is Box 830952, Room C218, ANS, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE 68583-0952. The Internet e-mail address is tsis@unl.edu. For policy information, use this address: jpoley@unl.edu.

National Distance Learning Center. This data base lists distance-education programs of all kinds, including correspondence courses and computer-based instruction. It is designed for remote searching by telecommunications.

Dial 502/686-4556 to speak with a person, or 502/686-4555 if you are using a modem (any baud rate up to 9600). You will need a computer with appropriate communications software.

effective as classroom training. But certain disclaimers apply.

Teletraining is not recommended for hard skills, unless a local instructor is available, as well. Master instructors for the Postal Service, for example, teach equipment maintenance from a television studio in Oklahoma to maintenance employees nationwide. But the employees have local instructors to help translate the teletraining to the equipment on the shop floor.

On the other hand, the medium works particularly well for training in soft skills such as interpersonal communications and leadership—and for delivering information on such topics as retirement planning. In such cases, a local facilitator is helpful but not necessary.

Learning doesn't have to end with the teletraining. Many agencies extend it past the videoconference through telephone conference calls and computer conferences. For example, through the Agriculture Department's extension service, people

can continue to exchange e-mail and conduct discussions on electronic bulletin boards nationwide, over the Internet, long after the teletraining is over.

Other indicators of sustained learning are less tangible. For example, here's a comment from the Panama Canal Commission, after a teletraining program: "What was especially good was hearing the opinions of people from other agencies."

How does it save money? The advantage of teletraining that most attracts training managers is low costs. Of course, distance learning offers high-quality training, with no travel costs beyond local travel. But the savings don't end there. Despite its high-tech reputation, the training itself often costs less than classroom training.

The reason is that most classroom training is priced on a per-person basis, usually starting at \$100 or more per person, per day. Distance learning, on the other hand, is normally priced per program, not per person.

For example, for \$500, government agencies can receive a program via satellite on sexual-harassment prevention. If your agency needs to train only one or two people, that price would probably be too high. But for large groups, the price is very attractive.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) in Atlantic City trains up to 50 employees at a time in sexual-harassment prevention. So the \$500 program translates to only \$10 per person. The Immigration and Naturalization Service in South Burlington, Vermont, also found the program to be cost-effective, calling it "an excellent way for us to provide training for a large group."

Agencies can save even more if several of them split the costs of training by videoconference. For example, four Veterans Administration facilities around Lincoln, Nebraska, recently shared the costs of some training programs on supervision.

But we don't have satellite dishes! Access to satellite dishes is becoming less of a problem, as more government agencies and other organizations install them. If you don't have your own dish, you can probably arrange to use somebody else's viewing site.

To find a local viewing site, check first with government agencies. Within the federal government, the largest numbers of satellite downlinks are operated by the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Veterans Affairs (especially V.A. medical facilities), the Postal Service, and the Social Security Administration. (The IRS has a large network, but the dishes are difficult to use because they are locked onto a single satellite. The Defense Department also has extensive facilities, but they are less accessible.)

Other federal agencies that have their own networks include the FAA, the U.S. Customs Service, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Most federal agencies make their facilities available to other government agencies at no charge if they are not using the downlink themselves on the day of the broadcast. And state and local governments are also installing dishes at an accelerating pace.

If no government facilities are available, try local community colleges, universities, and high schools. Educational institutions typically charge a fee, ranging from a few dollars per hour to a hundred dollars or more. Other alternatives include police and fire stations, local hotels, and satellite-dish rental firms (you'll find rental opportunities listed in the phone directory).

If you do search around, then you will probably find a video-conference facility within a reasonable distance, even if you are located in a rural setting. Your satellite training provider can often help you find a dish. Some will even make the arrangements for you.

What do I get? Many program providers encourage you to resell a teletraining program to other local organizations, to help you recover your costs.

For example, if the Public Broadcasting Service is offering a program featuring Peter Drucker or Peter Senge, it will include promotional materials that you can reproduce and distribute to your local Chamber of Commerce and other interested parties. The advance materials will also contain suggestions on how to get ready for the program—including where to point the satellite dish—as well as handouts and evaluation forms.

You might find the option of reselling a teletraining program to be a useful one, especially if you work in an educational institution. Government agencies—which may lack authority to promote a program or mechanisms to receive payment—are less likely to pursue that option.

A license agreement may prohibit you from recording a satellite program. If you are allowed to record it, you may have to pay an additional fee. Most providers prohibit you from duplicating, selling, renting, or otherwise distributing the copy you do make, but they will usually offer to sell you additional copies. These copies are better than ones you can make locally, because they are

recorded at the studio, not off the satellite.

Where can I go for information and programs? A variety of providers offers satellite programs that may be of interest to government agencies. Some of the better-known names include PBS and the American Management Association.

How do you learn what's available? There are several sources.

If you are adept at navigating the Internet, check into PBS's "gopher," which lists the programs offered by its Adult Learning Satellite Service. You can find the service at gopher@pbs.org (port 70).

To help trainers identify relevant programs,

a few universities and other organizations have established information clearinghouses. See the box of "Clearinghouses for Teletraining Programs," for some examples.

In addition to those clearinghouses, national associations such as the American Society for Training and Development and the National Society for Performance and Instruction have special-interest groups on the subject.

The largest association devoted exclusively to distance learning is the United States Distance Learning Association. USDLA holds conferences twice a year, publishes a newsletter, and offers other services related to distance learning. The address is Box 5129, San Ramon, CA 94583; 510/606-5160 or 800/829-3400.

How can I get started? Pick up the phone. It's easier than you think.

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