

# Trainers Network on the Net

Much of the Internet's appeal stems from its ability to support quick, global communication. Discussion groups on the Internet have formed around every conceivable topic, including topics of interest to training and development professionals.

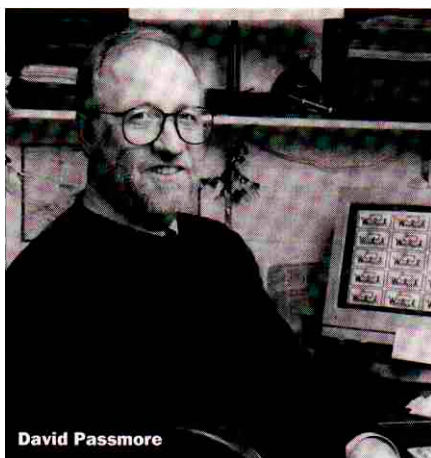
David Passmore, a professor of education at Pennsylvania State University in University Park, Pennsylvania, founded an Internet news group—also called a listserv—specifically for discussion of issues in training and development. Passmore recently talked with *Training and Development* associate editor Erica Gordon Sorohan about the training and development discussion listserv.

## *What is a listserv?*

A listserv is a computer program that maintains [an electronic] mailing list. People subscribe to the listserv—usually for free. A listserv has several functions. The training and development discussion listserv operates as an automated distribution list—any message mailed to the listserv is automatically delivered to all subscribers. The messages are usually text, but video, audio, and pictures can be sent as well. Also, the listserv can maintain an index of files.

## *Why did you start the training and development listserv?*

We started it in 1990 because there



was a need for quick and accessible communication of issues, problems, and opportunities in training and development. The Internet listserv services filled that bill for a lot of other interest communities. I figured, why not training and development?

We started the training and development list because we wanted to give researchers a way to interact. There really are very few platforms in training and development for discussions about the conduct and use of research. Many researchers were already connected to the Internet and familiar with the whole listserv concept. Why not use the Internet to facilitate that?

## *So you targeted people working primarily in academia and research institutions?*

Initially we targeted researchers, but soon practitioners began to subscribe.

When we started in 1990, we had about 100 subscribers, and that was just by word-of-mouth over the Internet. Most of the early subscribers were university people. We had those subscribers almost immediately—as soon as a listserv is available, the little “netbirds” start talking about it. We really didn't advertise it at all.

We currently have about 400 subscribers from 18 countries. My guess is that about half of our current subscribers, and most of our recent subscribers, work in the private sector. We also see an increase in government and military subscribers. And these trends in the number of people in the private sector and from the government and military who are using these kinds of services are similar to the entire Internet. There's been an explosion in the number of users on the Internet.

## *Given your original goals for this listserv, do you consider the composition of your subscriber list a positive development?*

We're delighted to try to serve the information and community needs that these subscribers seem to have. We originally hoped we would be able to stimulate research in training and development, and develop a kind of community of researchers.

But it has extended into other kinds of interests.

Primarily now we have practitioner concerns and questions on the listserv. I think what we see in the listserv is a reflection of exactly who's out there in the field of training and development.

*Why do you think this listserv appeals to practitioners?*

I think there are four kinds of interests among people on the training and development list.

One is what I would call community. People want to be able to interact with others who have similar functions and interests. The list provides them with an excellent place to meet people with whom they have a lot in common.

The second thing people want is information. Most of the messages that we have traveling over the training and development list include requests for information about products, services, and training solutions. People will write in with the problems that they have, or products that they are considering using, and they want to know what people know about these things. Ethical issues also come into play in training and development. We've had some threads of discussion about downsizing; sometimes subscribers voice frustrations about the lack of training and development in many organizations. So we've had a lot of what I'll call soft discussion of tough issues that people confront on a daily basis.

Another thing people are inter-

ested in is immediacy. The Internet is faster than the fax, and for the most part it appears to have fewer direct costs. A lot of the costs that people have are already absorbed in their own organizations' computing systems and resources that they've allocated for computing. So once you're there, it's relatively fast and cheap.

The fourth thing that I think people like about this is the spirit of *égalité*. There's a leveling of role. Across the Internet, you don't, for the most part, have the issue of level, reputation, clout, or strength. People seem to interact on a pretty much equal basis.

The community, the information, the immediacy, and the equality—that's what draws people to use the training and development list.

*You mentioned the candid discussions that take place. Were you suggesting that some people might be more up front, more comfortable giving their opinions than they might if they were in a face-to-face group?*

I don't know about that. It's a little like a cracker barrel. I think people are as unguarded in their discussion and comments as they might be in a casual after-hours-in-the-coffee-shop discussion. I think that's more of the tone.

We've had very little venting. We have very few whiners on the training and development list. Most discussions are solution-oriented: "How do I handle...?" "Here's a situation; have you had the same thing happen to you?" "Our company is thinking

about doing this. Has anybody out there done it, and how have you handled it?"

*What about people who do not necessarily identify themselves as trainers? Have they discovered your list?*

Yes, we have a little niche, I think, in the group of people who write computer documentation and do training on computers. They may not see themselves as involved with the field of training and development, but they are interested in training and development issues. We get a lot of questions from them, too. We have some people on the list who are involved with libraries.

We haven't seen people using the listserv as a research tool—say by directly polling members of the list. These people are an elite core. They have the technology and the interest that's strong enough to get them past the computer jargon and their modems and their cables to get onto the list. So I would imagine that this is a group that, if anything, is highly motivated and knows something about training and development. So they might form a good group for questionnaires, or for marketing research, or for other kinds of probes.

I thought we might begin to see a lot more product information—people trying to sell their wares on the Internet. We don't seem to get very much of that, and I'm kind of surprised that we don't. It's beginning to creep in.

*Advertising is a touchy subject among many Internet users. The prevailing attitude seems to be that advertising is undesirable on the Net. Do you see the lack of promotions on the listserv as a good thing?*

I'm open-minded on that. We're at a crossroad. For the most part, the amount of advertising I've seen on the Internet is relatively low. And it's easily dismissed. We may see more. It may become a problem, especially if it grabs up what the computer geeks like to call "bandwidth." If we see half of our messages filling our mailboxes with product information, I think we'll have trouble.

*How might participation on listservs and use of other Internet resources change the way training and develop-*

### A Global Discussion Group

Here is the distribution of current subscribers to the training and development listserv, by country of origin. A total of 400 people representing 18 countries subscribe to the list.

Country	Subscribers	Country	Subscribers
Australia	10	India	1
Austria	1	Mexico	1
Canada	38	Netherlands	4
Denmark	1	Portugal	1
Egypt	1	South Africa	3
Finland	3	Spain	3
Great Britain	6	Taiwan	4
Hong Kong	1	Thailand	1
Hungary	1	United States	320

## Feedback From the Net

What do you gain from participating in the training and development listserv on the Internet? How might the Internet alter your professional life? Here is how some people who subscribe to the TRDEV-L, as it's known on the Internet, answered those questions—posted on-line, of course.

"[TRDEV-L] fills a networking need that was previously unmet. I enjoy seeing the various issues come across the net and the ability to instantly reply if I feel I have information worth sharing. In addition, I have been able to incorporate a couple of activities and suggestions into training that I deliver."

— **Harold Gilbert**

Virginia Tech University  
Blacksburg, Virginia

"As a grad student in instructional design who will soon be part of the training world, this list has provided me with a valuable link to the 'real' world of training and the types of questions and challenges faced by

trainers today.... Listservs allow a communication [among] community members that brings to mind a romantic image of a group of craftspeople sharing their knowledge, goals, and techniques with each other, [at a time] when the advancement of the craft was more important than one-upmanship. What a magnificent resource, to be able to reach my peers and obtain or deliver aid in a constructive fashion."

— **Robert Parson**

Institute for Studies in Education  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

"I am on the faculty of the Institute for Leadership and Volunteer Development, a public service program at Virginia Tech.... As part of our mission, we write and print a variety of publications 'at cost.' We were literally spending more to mail the publications than to print them! We now have put more than a dozen publications on-line, and they are accessible through the Virginia Tech Cooperative Extension Gopher. This will allow us to

reduce postage costs and put more into development....

On one particular day, I had the consummate multimedia experience—Marcia Conner posted a request for information on multirater instruments on TRDEV-L in the morning, I responded via e-mail [and] included my phone number, she called me after lunch, and I put a package in the mail that afternoon. Now that's a system that works!"

— **Rona Vrooman**

Virginia Tech University  
Blacksburg, Virginia

"[I have] more access to information in the field, [and] faster, cheaper access to resources. My work is now doubled, trying to keep up with information.

"For the developing world, [the Internet] has a potential to link people who are unable to travel extensively. Long-distance learning is a possibility through [the] Internet."

— **Jay Wisecarver**

Norwegian Save the Children  
Bangkok, Thailand

*ment professionals work? What effects has the Internet had on your work?*

Many people now turn first to the Internet for information. They say, let's see what the training and development listserv subscribers will say.

Also, it allows you to work from a distance, but to be virtually at your desk.

Keeping up is an issue. One training and development listserv subscriber said his work is now doubled as he tries to keep up. You can get video, you can get audio, you can get pictures, and you can get text. You can get access to every document in the President's budget the day after it's out. It's just a tremendous amount of information, and it's very difficult to sift. This is a very practical problem. It's one that keeps off the Internet some potential users who could really benefit from it, and who could really contribute.

The only thing I can say is that there's really a need for selective attention. For instance, I get approximately 70 e-mail messages a day. I

don't read them all.

I use the Internet extensively in my teaching, both for messages and instruction. Primarily in teaching we've been stuck with a synchronous model [in which a teacher and a class have to come together in a certain place and at a certain time]. But we live in an asynchronous world. And the listservs allows you to capitalize on that. It's a logical extension of faxes and answering machines.

On the Internet, we have many groups concerned with such issues as TQM and ISO 9000. Without the Internet, they would not have the support, information, access to documents, or informal discussions that are so useful in trying to carry this stuff out.

That's why the training and development list has been useful for a lot of people, who have been helped—at a great distance—by colleagues. ■

*The training and development listserv (TRDEV-L) aims to stimulate research, collaboration, and assistance in training and development for the academic*

*and professional communities. TRDEV-L invites the discussion of policy and practice issues, posting of position openings, prepublication drafts of manuscripts, and news and reports of conferences.*

*For a free subscription to TRDEV-L, you must already have access to the Internet. Send an e-mail message to [listserv@psuvm.psu.edu](mailto:listserv@psuvm.psu.edu) with the message "SUB TRDEV-L your name" (without the quotation marks) in the body of the message. To request a subscription without sending e-mail, send your Internet address to David L. Passmore, 109G Rackley Building, University Park, PA 16802-3202; 814/863-2583; fax 814/863-7532. Passmore's e-mail address is [dlp@psu.edu](mailto:dlp@psu.edu).*

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