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A Vendor-Provided Case Study

Online Training, On Time

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Delivering to the desktop

The U.S. Postal Service recently faced a formidable new challenge: how to train 130,000 email users slated to be converted to Outlook 98 and Outlook 2002 email and organizer software, plus employees using the Outlook Web Access for Web browsers. Just as daunting was the target timeframe to deliver training to users all over the United States: It needed to train 130,000 users in 19 months.

Course developers at the Postal Service's National Center for Employee Development were eager to meet the challenge. Located in Norman, Oklahoma, NCED is a high-technology learning center that provides more than 240 courses through a mix of hands-on classroom and learning-technology formats. The professional staff develops and conducts programs for employees who manage and maintain postal computer networks, information systems, mail processing and tracking equipment, delivery vehicles, building systems, and other infrastructure technologies. NCED also provides training and conferencing support for other agencies and private-sector businesses.

Steve Mosier, NCED manager, tasked a team in the information technology branch with providing Outlook training that employees could complete within their own personal work and schedule requirements. Branch manager Rose Zvarick and team members Donna Lewis, Doyle Nix, and Dorothy Patton began exploring options. They decided to take a multipronged approach and deliver course information in several ways.

Development issues

"The easiest and most familiar way to deliver this type of training would be through intranet Web-based training and CD-ROM tutorial training," says Zvarick. "But due to bandwidth issues and download times, Web-based training is usually designed with text-based lists of instructions and definitions. The user is given a list of instructions to perform a given task. These instructions are formatted in presentation and Word document software, with tables of information, bulleted text, and glossaries of defined terms."

That style is best described as an e-learning book or publication. Many developers find it tedious to develop, and it's often frustrating and confusing to the learner, notes Zvarick. In essence, users must imagine or picture the tasks to be performed, and then list or memorize the steps to perform the tasks. Learners then attempt to perform the tasks in the application.

Zvarick and the training team wanted a better way—something that would show users the steps to perform in an onscreen tutorial. That would require a development package that could capture computer-screen shots and cursor movements. And for documentation purposes, users needed the ability to apply word bubbles with text to further describe the actions being performed. Though many screen-capture programs existed, too often the file sizes created were too large for Web-based training.

"We also needed something that had a small development cost, had multiple uses, and could be delivered to our customers in a timely manner," Mosier says. "We felt that our return-on-investment would be judged partly on how many ways we could use the tutorials and how many users would ultimately use the training products."

Developers' findings

A presentation and tutorial design pro-

gram called Qarbon ViewletBuilder helped the team overcome these obstacles. The method it uses to capture a screen and then track the mouse movements results in a small file size conducive to Web training. The program also offers a narration function with an option for a phone-quality audio file, which also has a small file size.

"The course developers found that the process of setting up these tutorials was greatly simplified by ViewletBuilder's screen-capturing process," Zvarick says. "The developers would perform a task or function and at key points hit the designated screen-capture key on the keyboard. After adding the word bubbles and narration, the Viewlet or tutorial would then be compiled. The compiled tutorial would then be coded and ready for the internet or a CD-ROM."

Results

Using this process for its tutorials, the training team was able to document the essential tasks in Outlook 98, Outlook 2002, and Outlook Web Access. "The resulting tutorials were excellent," Mosier says, "and addressed all of the team's issues and user requirements." The training team estimates it cut potential development time by one-fourth and was able to bring the courses online in three months instead of an estimated 12 months using other methods. The team reached 30,000 employees with training in the first 11 months—in line with the migration of employees to Outlook.

In addition to delivering training, the NCED team set up support for continued training delivery in two major ways. After the CD-ROM tutorials were built and used by NCED instructors, the team began preparing people from postal districts to help train employees in local post offices. These district trainers received classroom instruction with hands-on application at the NCED facility in Norman, Oklahoma. Then the trainers were given the CD-ROM tutorials the NCED team had designed with ViewletBuilder, to use in local classes.

Postal headquarters financed the Outlook training on an "as needed" basis. The initial funding from headquarters bought the district trainers a limited number of CD-ROM tutorials to supply to the field users, but the local post offices could purchase additional tutorials using their own funds. So, the NCED team prepared to meet increasing field demands for more tutorial CD-ROMs by setting up a responsive process for a local vendor to duplicate the tutorial masters. The result: Post offices are being provided with additional CD-ROM tutorials on an as-needed basis.

Flexibility

The tutorial program is a Web-based training tool. The training team found the Outlook tutorials easy to set up for Web training or e-learning delivery. An e-learning course was created within days of completing each of the CD-ROM-based tutorials. As demand for the e-learning courses grew, postal headquarters funded logins for postal field users to access NCED's e-learning courses. At that point, the training team had already delivered tutorials training on CD-ROM and e-learning. For a nominal cost, NCED was able to further expand the Outlook training options to offer just-in-time comprehensive training for all 130,000 users U.S.-wide.

NCED is now exploring developing additional CD-ROM and e-learning courses using the tutorial style of course delivery. "The Postal Service is currently using the Microsoft Office suite of software, which could also lend itself to tutorial-style training," says Mosier. "This type of tutorial can be an effective way to teach any complex, computer-related application."

The Postal Service's National Center for Employee Development provides advanced education for employees who manage, operate, and maintain high-technology systems. Core technical programs cover information systems, building systems, automation equipment, material handling, robotics, vending equipment, vehicle maintenance, maintenance management, and environmental and safety programs. The center also offers many of its learning programs to other government agencies, as well as to private-sector businesses. The 62-acre campus in Norman, Oklahoma, also hosts conferences from 50 to 850 attendees, with onsite meals, guest housing, shuttles, and recreation.

For more information nced.com, 877.438.6233 (training services) or 405.366.4752 (conference services).