TRAINING 101

Pick the Right Self-Paced Package

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Self-paced instruction can pin the trainee in a hopeless battle of man against manual or machine. To make sure your trainees have every advantage, ask the following questions of each self-paced package you consider. The more yeses you get before you purchase, the more compatible the package will be with the objectives—and participants—of your training.

☐ **Is the learning environment appropriate?**

Trainees must be comfortable and have the appropriate tools for learning. This includes an exclusive work space where the trainee can work uninterrupted.

☐ **Are helpful resources included?**

Trainees must know where to go for help when they get stuck—which supervisor or tutor and what documentation. Equipment operation guidelines should be provided to help trainees use a computerized system.

☐ **Are instructions to trainees clear at all times?**

Instructions must be clear and detailed enough so that trainees always know *exactly* what to do. Remember, in self-paced training there's no readily available instructor to explain confusing materials.

☐ **Is the instruction presented in short segments?**

Segments of instruction, often called "frames" or "blocks," should cover small pieces of information. This way, trainees can control the amount of information that must be digested at any one time. Titles and headings should be used often to help trainees quickly identify instruction segments.

☐ **Are clusters of frames (topics) and clusters of topics (lessons) always introduced?**

A system that introduces the instructions often prepares trainees for what is to come. Introductions serve as advance organizers for new material. They include the objectives and are short and to the point.

☐ **Are trainees told the learning objectives at each level of instruction?**

Objectives, written in performance terms and used at the course, unit and lesson level, let trainees know what is expected of them. Objectives should be a part of each introduction.

☐ **Are there reviews?**

Information reviews in the form of exercises or transition frames help trainees transfer skills and knowledge to new situations. Instructional summaries should include objectives as review points. For example, "In this unit we covered. . . Let's review what we learned."

☐ **Are trainees exercised often?**

Exercises should follow almost all topic clusters, lessons and units. It is okay to cover the same information more than once, especially if it is repeated at different levels of complexity. Exercises can range from objective-based quizzes—multiple choice or short-answer items—to sophisticated case studies and computer simulations. The decision on the type of exercise to use depends on the nature of the content, objectives of the instruction, trainee abilities, and the time and resources available for training design and delivery.

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☐ **Are the exercises tied directly to the lesson/unit/course objectives?**

Objective-based exercises have the most relevance for trainees.

☐ **Do trainees receive immediate feedback?**

It is crucial that students get feedback directly after each exercise. This is the best time for pinpointing and correcting errors. In addition, immediate positive and corrective feedback are powerful trainee motivators.

☐ **Is the feedback comprehensive?**

Comprehensive feedback includes reinforcement of the correct response, explanations of incorrect responses, text/program references with the correct response discussed, and remedial instruction, as necessary.

☐ **Are there plenty of examples, covering several viewpoints and levels of learning ability? Are they tied to the ultimate performance objectives and relevant to the trainees?**

If possible, let trainees choose from different types of examples based upon their individual needs and work environment. This is especially important if the training is targeted at a mixed group of trainees.

☐ **Are illustrations used effectively and often?**

Illustrations are extremely helpful in explaining difficult concepts. It should be easy to associate each illustration with its explanatory text.

☐ **Are all new terms defined?**

This should be done within the text, not just in a glossary. Trainees should always be able to see how new terms fit in with old knowledge.

☐ **Can specific information be located quickly?**

A table of contents, an index and computer-based instruction (CBI) menus help trainees find material fast. Also helpful, for print materials, are standard or bleed tabs.

☐ **Have human factors been considered?**

Learning should not be punishment for trainees. Breaks, humor and conversational messages should be incorporated into the instruction, in addition to user-friendly packaging and delivery. When judging a training package, consider its screen design (CBI), page layout and type style (print), and pacing (video or slide programs).

☐ **Can trainees transfer learning to the job?**

The overriding determinant for a training program's relevance and usefulness lies with the trainee, not with the material or the trainer. If trainees don't see the value in a program, it never will be successful.

☐ **Is the delivery system reliable?**

Judge a high-technology delivery system by how adaptable it is to a variety of subject areas and the degree to which it satisfies other training requirements of the organization. The courseware developed for a system should be compatible with as many hardware configurations as reasonable. The hardware must be able to withstand heavy use by trainees who may not treat it very delicately.

☐ **Has the program been thoroughly tested?**

More than any other type of training programs, self-paced programs must be put through rigorous testing with trainees. Trainees should be able to send feedback to the program developers. Follow-up evaluation of the program's effectiveness should be an ongoing process.

☐ **Is the instruction cost effective?**

The benefits of the instruction to the trainees and, ultimately, to the organization must outweigh its costs. A cost/benefit analysis should be done while deciding on hardware, off-the-shelf vs. self-developed courseware, and whether or not the training problem calls for a self-paced solution in the first place.