

Teletraining Applied

When a major insurance company needed a cost-effective way to deliver training to 3,000 people in 100 locations, it used teletraining. The key to success was mixing good training methods with the right technology.

By EDWARD Y. KUNG and RUSSELL N. RADO

When a human resource development organization markets its products and services, delivery is often as critical as the products themselves. Quality and cost effectiveness were the characteristics that CIGNA's human resource department wanted in a delivery system for a curriculum of core knowledge and skills. We selected a basic, two-way audio system as the best technology for delivering the training to members of the property and casualty group, which comprises 20,000 employees at more than 200 locations.

The product

Since 1982, the training department had been developing an integrated curriculum that would highlight the core knowledge and skills of the managers, professionals and clerical employees in the property and casualty group. To develop the curriculum, we used a competency model that uses job analysis to define knowledge and skill requirements for an organization and the positions in it. The results, which we call knowledge and skill guides, are a tool for managers to use with employees to enhance performance and manage professional growth by comparing actual knowledge and skill profiles with job requirements.

The guides were pilot tested, and plans were made for their use with more than 3,000 employees in more than 100 locations. The product had the endorsement and support of line management and lacked only the right delivery mechanism.

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Enter teletraining

To ensure that employees would understand and be able to use the guides, an introductory training session was planned, including an opportunity to raise questions and concerns.

After studying the alternatives for the implementation sessions, such as sending trainers to local offices or bringing participants to centralized training locations, we decided to use teletraining as our delivery vehicle. It addressed several concerns we had about the implementation.

The guides represented a new way of addressing knowledge and skill and doing developmental planning. Though the process was straightforward, there were many potential areas for misinterpretation. Teletraining allowed an expert to participate in each session and to address problems or questions on-line.

The ability to train many locations simultaneously would reduce the time needed to train the target population. Teletraining would enable employees to be trained in their own offices, thus reducing time away from the job. Teletraining would be less expensive than conventional training because it would eliminate almost all travel expenses usually associated with classroom instruction. We selected two-way, interactive audio communication as the most cost-effective way to implement the introduction to the skills guides.

A primary concern was audience acceptance of the medium. We needed to warm up the cool medium of teletraining, build in participation and structure off-line activities before, during and after the training. We also needed to include exercises to test people's understanding and ability to complete the process.

We used personnel representatives as on-site facilitators to introduce and explain the medium and to be present during the session. They were already located at the sites, and travel was

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necessary only for representatives who normally covered more than one location.

To establish comfort with the medium, participants introduced themselves on-line to their peers in other cities. An instructor, also on line, then described the teletraining process.

A key to the participants' acceptance of teletraining was their active participation. Lectures were minimal. On-line and off-line exercises varied the pace and activities and provided a way to test for understanding. The two and one-half hour session was not considered too long by the participants.

After conducting some dry runs, we constructed a lesson plan that we felt would achieve our program objective and create a positive feeling about the knowledge and skill guides and about teletraining.

A successful pilot test

Four pilot teletraining sessions were conducted from the home office, linking several field locations per session.

The instructor followed a prepared lesson plan while the local facilitators provided logistical support and added a personal touch to the session. The facilitators were to: coordinate participants' questions to the instructor; display visuals on cue from the instructor; coordinate off-line activities; and administer an evaluation of the guides and teletraining.

Coordinating questions was a critical responsibility because many locations were involved. We used a process that helped avoid chaos but did not discourage questions.

Going national

National implementation of the knowledge and skill guides involved more than 3,000 employees at 100 locations who participated in 56 training sessions. These steps describe the national implementation:

- Produce and distribute booklets on the guides to participants.
- Distribute and communicate a national implementation schedule.
- Provide the schedule to AT&T, whose conference operators would initiate all the calls.
- Prepare and distribute a local facilitator's guide.
- Conduct one-hour preparation sessions for local facilitators via teletraining.
- Prepare instructors for the course. Most of the instructors were from the

home office. Those from the field training staff were briefed by teletraining. All instructors had a prepared lesson plan.

- Conduct the session.
- Complete the knowledge and skill guide process.

AT&T Quorum speakerphones were used at the field locations. These units contain an omni-directional microphone and speaker system, which can handle up to 40 participants at one location. The units are portable and can be shipped easily between locations. We were able to save money by using only 20 units.

The instructors, who had no participants with them, used Contact C-10 speakerphones. These small units are suitable for two or three people placed close by.

For most participants, this was their first teletraining experience and the overall reaction was favorable. The success of teletraining in implementing the guides set the stage for using the medium more extensively and exploring its potential.

Future use

Our next major teletraining project is to provide advanced training on workers' compensation insurance for 1,400 managers and professionals in 60 offices. We anticipate covering each subject in three-hour sessions.

We are initiating two other teletraining applications: panel discussions by senior management, and briefing and tutoring on self-study materials.

Panel discussions among senior managers have always been an important highlight of our management and technical training seminars. However, it has been difficult to arrange participation, especially when the programs are held away from the home office. With the successful introduction of teletraining, there is now high receptivity to panel discussions using this medium.

We have found that some people who might benefit from a self-study program are reluctant to delve into unfamiliar materials. To overcome this problem, we are planning to offer tele-briefing and tele-tutoring on such programs.

As we expand the use of teletraining and its variations, we continue to explore instructional methods for enhancing its effectiveness. We find that this technology, even at the simple level of two-way audio, is a very efficient and effective mechanism for training delivery.