Trends in Technology Training

Effective training strategies are invaluable components of a competitive strategy in today's high-tech, corporate environment. After all, why invest heavily in modern technologies without teaching people how to effectively utilize new tools and resources?

But, just as technology has changed over the years, so have the ways people learn. It is important for IT leaders to understand their options when considering training programs to ensure that their employees are getting a favorable learning experience while balancing other considerations such as logistics, convenience and costs.

The Standards

For the past 20 years, instructor-led and e-learning courses have been the two most common forms of training, and the most cost effective approach. While instructor-led training combines lecture, facilitated discussions, Q&A, peer-to-peer interaction and hands-on experience e-learning combines lecture, online discussions, simulations and demonstrations, virtual labs and peer-to-peer interaction through social media, blogs and wikis.

However, while some material may be easier for the learner to grasp in an instructor-led forum, instructor-led training is not always the perfect solution. For example, it can be more expensive than other options. Depending on the length of the training period, daily costs for an instructor can be significant. In addition, logistics and scheduling constraints complicate the implementation of an instructor-led program.
E-learning became popular in the 1990s because of its availability to the user. Users can complete e-learning courses outside of normal office hours, at home or even on the road. Learning is also self-paced. The online modules require the user to read or listen and then select the option to continue to the next module. Thus, an e-learning training course can accommodate each individual’s learning pace. E-learning can be tracked and assessments can be scored for compliance modules such as annual non-harassment or information security training.

People often think that e-learning is typically not as effective in conveying knowledge or explaining new concepts as instructor-led training. However, it offers many options to engage the learner through quizzes, virtual labs, simulations, demonstrations, games, avatars and more. E-learning provides more flexibility for an increasingly mobile workforce.

In recent years, training via Web 2.0 or training conducted with modern Internet characteristics and functionality offers new options to learners. The primary characteristic of Web 2.0 is communication using wikis, blogs, social networking and collaboration tools, virtual classrooms and meeting centers such as WebEx and LiveMeeting. This forum for training is more dynamic than the Web’s previous static environment, as users are empowered to contribute to content. Web 2.0 resources can also enhance the effectiveness of a learning program by serving as a post-training resource users can visit for real-time information or support.

Users are drawn to Web 2.0 (as of November 2012, 69 percent of adult Internet users belong to a social network); training professionals would be wise to integrate elements of Web 2.0 into training programs. However, because Web 2.0 forums are relatively new to the market, most learning professionals are still working out the best ways to achieve learning objectives with these options. Use of Web 2.0 forums require close governance since incorrect information can be communicated just as easily as correct information. Moreover, companies can risk violating various security and/or HR policies if they are not careful about setting standards for who uses each forum and how they are used.

The Next Generation: Web 2.0 and Training

- **Discussion Boards/Blogs**: Internet forums used for online discussions originated as the modern equivalent of a traditional bulletin board and a technological evolution of the dial-up bulletin board system. From a training standpoint, discussions are most commonly used for post-training support. Learners can post questions and moderators can respond to their concerns so that all learners can benefit.

- **Webinars**: Web conferences, typically one-way communication from the speaker to the audience with limited audience interaction, have reshaped the traditional teacher–student relationship. A webinar allows participants to view slide shows and PowerPoint presentations in real time.

- **Wikipedia**: A multilingual, Web-based, free-content encyclopedia populated with anonymous contributions. Wikipedia’s articles provide links to guide the user to related pages with additional information.

- **Twitter**: The new wave in social networking and micro-blogging enables users to send and read messages, known as Tweets. Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters displayed on the author’s profile page and delivered to the author’s subscribers, or followers. Twitter can be used for training in a number of ways: as a reminder of upcoming training events and key learning content, as pre-emptive help for learning a new process or procedure, or to provide links to articles of interest.

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1Pew Research Center, August 26, 2011
LinkedIn and Facebook: A social networking Web site that allows users to add correspondents or friends, send them messages and update their personal profiles. Additionally, users can join networks organized by city, workplace, school or region where the training takes place. These networks have hosted training sessions via videos, blogs and discussion boards.

Blended Training
Blended training combines the best features of instructor-led and e-learning programs with the immediacy of Web 2.0’s Internet resources to create high-quality training programs. While it can provide face-to-face interaction, blended learning offers more flexibility than a pure instructor-led option, as learners can complete assignments when time permits between instructor meetings. Moreover, compared with e-learning, blended learning lessens the distance between learner and instructor, while still presenting some of the benefits associated with peer interaction in the classroom and post-training. Students can access knowledge wherever they are via online forums and then meet with an instructor to review progress or discuss questions.

Real Life Example #1
We recently implemented a blended approach for an auto insurance company seeking to roll out a new systems application. For the initial training of 9,000 participants across 4,500 sites, we provided instructor-led training via a virtual delivery medium (WebEx) to set learning context and help participants navigate the newly created e-learning tool. Users then took interactive e-learning courses that combined learner application scenarios, exercises, and assessments. With this blended program, the customer experienced immediate absorption of content and usage of the new application, which mitigated help desk call volume and provided immediate return on investment. The instructor-led component was cost-effective because a virtual delivery model was used. Moreover, the final e-learning course allowed the client to reuse it when the application was implemented at additional sites or when new users adopted the tool.

Real Life Example #2
Another blended learning course we recently built incorporated a Web 2.0 training component for a program designed to re-skill developers at one of the world’s most acclaimed medical and research clinics. To foster awareness and provide high-level information pertinent to each learning topic, we created a series of short, one-day webinars. Then we utilized a variety of learning mediums including instructor-led training, e-learning, lunch-and-learn, mentoring, independent-study resources and a hands-on certification workshop to deliver the content to users across a variety of locations. This custom design offered participants deeper learning and kept them engaged throughout their learning tracks. It also helped break down institutional and cultural barriers by facilitating interaction between learners from affiliate and remote locations during the virtual courses. Next year, we hope to enhance this learning program by implementing “communities of practice” that will enable users to share tips, discuss project initiatives, host guidelines and even share reusable code.

Conclusion
To quickly bring users up to speed with new technologies, it is critical for companies to understand the pros and cons of all educational options. Each training forum offers benefits and drawbacks. Organizations can achieve their objectives by choosing a program that integrates the best aspects of each.

ABOUT US
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