

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Web-based Tools Grow as a Resource for Training

By Jason Greer

As society changes, companies are being forced to design training programs that are both cost- and time-effective and also keep employees abreast of technological and social advances.

The U.S. Small Business Administration has published an 80-question survey on the World Wide Web to which companies can refer when determining training needs. The "Checklist for Developing a Training Program" says a company should first set an overall goal, then determine what each employee needs to learn to reach that goal.

"Analyzing the goal can be done in the form of surveys or walking around and observing," says Camille Currier, account executive and training specialist for the Employee Training Institute in San Diego. "It is very important to the process because it determines whether the goal encompasses the training needs."

Currier says that once a goal has been set, the company must get employee "buy-in." "Employees have to be sold on the training," she says. "The buy-in process is related to how the training responds to the learning needs of individuals. It is very important to have the staff excited and supportive."

Next, the checklist says to determine what type of training is needed and what method of instruction will be used.

Tools for training will vary according to the goal of the training and the learning needs of employees. "Text and audio are OK, but there are those who learn by doing, and for them simulation is best," Currier says. "Simulating a scenario is especially good for customer service training."

The checklist takes the reader through a series of other steps that include timing considerations, physical facilities, program costs, marketing, and who will perform the training.

Learnavity.com, a site that provides guidance for companies in search of the best teaching tool, offers a variety of quizzes to determine the learning styles of employees. The site also offers statistics, Web tools, surveys and nationwide trends in training. Currier says Web-based tools have expanded training options and made the process less rigid.

"Technology has been a very big strength, especially the Web," says Currier. "Online training tools are very popular, and, in general, using the Internet is a more sophisticated means of communicating."

Currier says that while technology has caused a trend in training, so has diversity in the workplace. As the work force changes, she says, it is necessary to have employees be sensitive to the needs of others.

"Diversity training is a proactive approach to curtailing problems with people who are not sensitive to diversity issues," Currier says. "Companies can no longer afford to be liable for employees who are not dealing with issues of race, gender and sexual orientation on the job."

Companies such as the Target Corp. have adopted the slogan, "Valuing Diversity," and according to its Web site, diversity education is a major part of company training. The site displays a written commitment to diversity training that "teaches people to capitalize on the rich talents and perspectives of others."

Sometimes it is unrealistic for a company to provide training from within. According to the American Society for Training and Development, outsourced training has risen steadily since 1996.

"Oftentimes companies don't have the in-house staff to provide adequate training, so they recruit training service outside of the company," says Anne Aarness, marketing and communications manager for LearningByte International in Minneapolis. "We can provide expertise from a variety of areas a company may not have access to."

Aarness says that using someone from outside of the company is more efficient because that person is objective and employees tend to be more candid with a fresh face.

She says her team often is asked to both design and implement training modules because an outside trainer comes in with no strings attached and leaves any "dirty baggage" behind.

"Confidentiality is an attractive feature to companies," Aarness says. "Our team members are not at liberty to disclose any information about the company."

Prior to developing a training module, Aarness says, consultants talk with its workers to determine the strength of the company's infrastructure.

Whether their resources are in-house or outsourced, companies have many options for developing the right training package.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics has a Web site, <http://www.bls.gov>, which includes links to training data and trends. Similar information can be found at <http://www.trainingsupersite.com> and <http://www.astd.org>.

For any training exercise, Currier says, the logical production remains the same: "Set a goal, analyze, design, develop, evaluate and then implement it." ■