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Computer-based training is gaining in popularity as a cost effective and efficient method of employee development. Rich Weissman takes a look at the growing trend of online education

Scott was excited when his shift supervisor told him he was in line for more supervisory training. His mind drifted happily to his previous week long training class in the fancy resort hotel, where the weather was great, the food top notch, and the golf course extraordinary. He began to think about buying a new set of golf clubs when his boss handed him a package that contained a course workbook, some CDs, and a computer log-on and password. Scott was going for training all right, but it was going to be held in the training room at his factory. This was a sad reality for Scott but a cost savings for his company.

Computer-based training has become the employee development method of choice in many manufacturing organizations. It is an efficient and effective means of training employees in a whole range of subjects such as company orientation, health and safety, and advanced manufacturing techniques. Static CD based training has evolved to include interactive web-based educational programs with custom developed course content that can be learned in the morning and directly applied to work environment in the afternoon. It is a cost effective process that reduces or eliminates travel expenses, improves productivity by keeping employees on-site, allows for focused company specific training, and increases course completion rates. Additionally, companies can easily track and control employee training hours, monitor the overall success of training programs and integrate and respond to student feedback.

Employee training is making a comeback, but the delivery process is evolving towards a more focused approach. Not all training lends itself to the computer and the web, but more and more seems to be heading that way. The American Society of Training and Development (ASTD), in their 2003 benchmarking report of trends in workplace learning and performance, show that training hours per employee are increasing. The delivery of training, through the use of learning technologies such as CD-ROM and online sessions, also generally increased in the organizations that were surveyed. The ASTD also determined that the employee groups receiving the largest percentage of training included customer service and production employees.

Lean manufacturing and other progressive operational initiatives depend on a well trained workforce, and computer based training is an efficient method for delivering that education. Innovative, dynamic and pertinent courses, readily available to employees at their work stations or desktops, is a key to successful training. Some companies provide special training rooms where employees can access their required courses during work hours or at other scheduled times. Training kiosks and dedicated training workstations, often located in employee break areas and cafeterias, give employees easy access to courses and other learning aids. Still others companies offer employees the opportunity to access their training from home or a local library, either from CDs or online. Most courses are self-paced, allowing for students to progress at their own rate.

Others may be interactive, where the students actively participate in synchronous learning activities with their classmates and the instructor.

Computer based training courses are often available around the clock. Companies may also provide a blend of hands on and computer based training, where classroom activities complement the course work. An example is lift truck



training. "There are just some courses that still demand some instructor and hands on interaction," says Tom Gaudreau, director of marketing and channel sales for Nashville, TN-based PureSafety, a provider of online risk management and compliance based training. "Our online training is excellent, but we realize that some training requires hands-on demonstrations from the instructor and also a demonstration of capabilities from the students."

PureSafety focuses on training that supports environmental and safety subjects, including those related to DOT and OSHA requirements. Many of their products are customized for their clients, and PureSafety maintains a staff of content development professionals to work directly with clients on curriculum issues. In addition, Gaudreau sees an increase in popularity for personal health programs, with many companies beginning to offer training in subjects such as stress reduction, drug and alcohol addiction, and diet and exercise. "Computer based training offerings have evolved as the workplace has evolved," says Gaudreau. "Employee health impacts productivity and ultimately customer service. We see employees and employers embracing this type of training as a method of self-improvement."

The positive return on investment of computer based training has certainly caught the attention of Fortune 500 companies. General Motors, 3M, Motorola, Northwest Airlines, Owens-Illinois and Pfizer have joined together to establish the Toledo, OH-based consortium LearnShare. Founded in 1996, LearnShare manages the computer based education of over two million employees, concentrating on subjects such as manufacturing technology, shop floor skills, supervisory training, compliance, safety and hazardous material awareness, leadership, and project management. Courses range from short tutorials to online degree programs delivered in conjunction with Jones International University.

"One of our strengths is in the consistency of the training that we provide our consortium members, as well as the ability to customize training to their needs," says LearnShare President and CEO Lois Webster, a former director of Motorola University in Asia. " We also manage their training and host their e-learning programs. Managing the back end is very critical to an effective training process." LearnShare also creates educational portals for client companies that helps employees and managers alike to manage their training needs. "Training managers can get reports on enrollment statistics and automatically communicate with employees who need or who have just completed training. Our learning management process helps managers manage their employee training and development process."

Learning management systems are important to the success of computer based training programs, and large enterprise software providers like Oracle and PeopleSoft offer comprehensive platforms. "One key area of online training that is often overlooked is the ability to document and assess training activity as a means to demonstrate compliance with legislative directives such as worker health and safety and governance topics," says Chris Pirie, vice president of Oracle iLearning, a learning management tool supporting enterprise wide training. These systems also support the extended supply chain. "If the manufacturer has the right online educational infrastructure, it can be used to educate beyond the bounds of the company to supply chain partners or distributors," to reduce time to market and facilitate better operational alignment."

PeopleSoft also has an enterprise learning management system supporting the entire supply chain. "PeopleSoft Learning Management provides manufacturing organizations the ability to manage, deploy, and most importantly measure the impact of training on operating performance," says Mark Lange, vice president of global marketing of PeopleSoft HCM. "Our learning management solutions ensures that manufacturers can have the right training delivered to the right person at the right time in order to optimize output, throughput, and quality," while reducing materials waste, machine downtime, and workplace accidents." Continued pressure on organizations to improve manufacturing efficiency and productivity, meet compliance objectives, and reduce workplace accidents is resulting in a need for increased employee training at all levels of the organization. Computer based training, primarily in the form of online offerings, is providing all sized companies a cost effective way to efficiently manage their employee training and development process. Whether a stand alone prepackaged program, or a custom developed company specific curriculum, technology is changing the training landscape. In fact, Scott recently improved his golf game with an online tutorial.

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