

BACK TO SCHOOL

WHEN IT COMES TO TRAINING PROGRAMS, SHOULD LEARNING COME TO YOU, SHOULD YOU GO TO LEARNING, OR IS A BLEND OF BOTH THE BEST APPROACH?

by ROBERT DUTT

Training. It's critical, but it's time-consuming. It can provide a competitive differentiator for your business, but it requires your best and most valuable people off the street for stretches of time to make it happen.

So what's a solution provider to do?

There are a variety of ways for training programs to be delivered today. The good news is that the choice of online vs. in-person presents a variety of options, each with their own pros and cons. The bad news is that the choice of online vs. in-person presents a variety of options, each with their own pros and cons.

The case for online

We're an industry that sells technology, so it only makes sense that we'd embrace technology for most things – education included. Kendra Lee, president of Colorado-based KLA Group, which offers sales training courses for IT solution providers, said online dominates the training equation, and for obvious reasons. A well-crafted training program, run over the course of multiple weeks, offers benefits that a more concentrated in-person course simply cannot.

"You can assign practice – if you're doing value proposition, you can get [students] to practice what they learned on ten calls before you get back together again," Lee said. "Now they're coming back in with real-world experience."

Depending on the type of course, online can also offer the kind of do-it-in-your-own-time flexibility that proves very popular – with solution providers' principals because it means less time out of the field; and with staffers because they can more easily fit it into their schedules.

"With online, the real strength is the ability to get there when you can get there," said Eric Strause, director of Global Knowledge's worldwide director of Cisco training programs.

And, of course, even if the course material is dollar-for-dollar the same as an in-person course, and online course is significantly less expensive – both in actual fees (because of airfare, hotel, cabs, meals and other travel expenses) and loss-of-business costs (top people not working the phones for lengthy stretches of time).

The case for in-person

It's more flexible, it's less expensive, it offers ongoing engagement. What's not to like about online training programs? Well, for one, it lacks that certain "je ne sais quoi" – that extra bit of enlightenment that comes from being immersed in a subject.

Stuart Crawford is senior advisor and partner at Calgary-based Ulistic, which offers training on social media-related topics. One of its primary target markets is the North American managed services community, largely because of Crawford's own extensive



background in the solution provider community.

"Online training is just the accepted norm in the MSP business," Crawford said. "It's an easy way to facilitate training, and you can conduct your training live and record it for playback later."

Still, there's something missing online engagements, something that happens with in-person connections over the course of a

few days or a week, that doesn't happen when the same content is being delivered through a browser. For Crawford, the extra value of in-person comes down to a simple question: "What's the return on time invested?"


"If you send your best engineer to Redmond for a three-day intensive training session with the Windows Server team, you'll probably learn some stuff you wouldn't normally get in the online classroom. There's just a certain level of interaction that doesn't exist there – it's the hallway time or the bar time that comes after-hours."

To make sure those bonuses add as much value as possible, Crawford suggests going into everything – meals, leisure-time, even a casual before-class chat in the hallway, with a single question in mind: "What other things can we learn?"

And call it an intangible, but the "ego factor" is a factor – doing a training course that involves going out of town for a few days has a certain air of a reward for good performance. Doing a Web-based course offered to more of the staff? Less exclusivity, and therefore less prestige, Strause said.

Rise of the third column: Hybrid

Of course, we live in a world that's not black or white; chocolate or vanilla. So, sensibly enough, many organizations are finding a hybrid of the two approaches to be ideal. This is especially true for longer-term courses. Consider Cisco's newly announced advanced architecture selling program for pre-sales staff at channel partners, delivered by Global Knowledge. The program is exceptionally long, running for over a quarter, but exemplifies how a hybrid program works.

Students come together for a week of first-round training, then spend time in their job applying their newly-learned skills in the field. All the while, they have "homework" and virtual sessions to reinforce and add to what was learned in-class. Then students come together for some more in-person training. Rinse and repeat the online process. 

MAKING HONORS

HERE'S A COLES NOTES VERSION OF THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN DESIGNING OR SELECTING TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR YOUR STAFF.

1. Make sure it applies to your business

Getting a great whiz-bang marketing or sales expert to teach your team is great, but is it as impactful as it could be? KLA Group president Kendra Lee said that for training to be truly efficient, even role-based or example-based isn't enough to make it really hit home. "If you're doing value propositions, it has to be your value proposition so they come away understanding how to apply it," she said.

"People today are looking for real, tangible action items," said Stuart Crawford, senior advisor and partner at Ullistic. "They're looking for the execution piece, not the theory piece."

2. Make sure the trainer knows your business

Related closely to point number one, a marketing or sales guru who's made a name in the oil and gas industry may offer some good motivational or general advice, but are they going to be able to apply their knowledge to the esoteric details of your industry. Technology solutions are intricate stuff to begin with – add to that trying to communicate the nuance of a managed services practice, and you're better to have a trainer who you don't have to have train on your business first. "That's why we play up our 15 years as a VAR and an MSP to illustrate we know what it takes," Crawford said.

3. Call for reinforcements

This may be the biggest one in the mind of Lee. The best course presented by the best presenter is going to get pretty much zero traction if attendees aren't taught how to reinforce what they've covered in class, or better yet, are given exercises to use what they've learned. "You have to have some sort of reinforcement, or it just won't be used," Lee warned.

Even in the online world, this kind of ongoing contact is more possible and popular than ever before, said Eric Strause, director of Global Knowledge's worldwide director of Cisco training programs, thanks to Web 2.0 and social networking tools.

"It becomes a lot less about getting a butt in the seat and nothing more," he said. "Now through social tools, you people to stay and linger around a lot more."

4. Measure everything

For Strause, "the choices really come down to quality metrics." Knowing what you want to accomplish, and understanding how your supplier is going to measure that success – or understanding how to come up with those metrics yourself if you're doing a training program in-house – will make sure you're getting the most for your investment.

5. Think of new routes

Like so many things on the Internet, the idea of reusable, relocatable training content in the late 1990s training world was an idea a bit ahead of its time, according to Strause. But just like ASP idea has been reinvigorated a decade later as managed service, and this time is for real, now the delivery engines and other technological pieces have caught up to what was always a good idea. Better management tools plus a variety of new

platforms on which to deliver training (mobile devices and tablet PCs in particular) mean much flexibility for learners. "There's a lot of things changing out there right now," Strause said.

6. The power of the peer

Especially with millennial entering the marketplace for on-the-job training, there's a subtle power shift going on, Strause suggested. For the younger generation, there's less value in just the instructor themselves. The teacher still plays a very important role, but for a generation used to collaborating, sharing and learning from each other, the members of the peer group matter just as much as does the instructor.

7. The right instructor for the right job

As important as it is for the instructor to know both their material and your business, it's important that they understand the medium they're using and how to get the most of it. In face-to-face, instructors are "true trainers," said Lee – they stand in front of a class for hours on end and know their material very, very well. On the Web, it may be easier to use your own source material for when that knowledge isn't top-of-head, there's a whole different skill set in play: the gift for engaging people over the Web.

"You're much more of a facilitator in Web-based training," Lee said. "You don't have to know your content in quite the same way, but you've got to keep people awake and draw them back in." All without being able to read the non-verbal clues that are so readily evident in an in-class environment.

8. It's a retention strategy

As the economy begins to improve, there's a bit more money available. However, companies are still running as lean as they were at the height of the recession. Thus, retention becomes all the more important for solution providers.

9. Change is inevitable

In many ways, Strause paints training as an evergreen opportunity. Your customers may have held off on their big technology decisions when the economy was at its worst, but sooner or later, they have to invest or fall behind. The same thing happens when it comes to staying on top of the latest trends in technology.

"You can only avoid training for so long in IT," Strause said. "You have to come back for it at some point. Technology just keeps evolving."

10. Give it time

While acknowledging that many small solution providers in particular are tired of "one-hit wonders" in the training field, Lee urges solution providers to have some patience, and approach training as a long-term thing.

"If you're doing a full training program, whether it's Web-based or face-to-face, I would say it's a six- to nine-month period of development – the big difference between the two is the frequency with which you meet, but the total time involved is about equal." 