

## **Rochester Business Journal**

*"Managers at work" Column - May 11, 2007*

### **E-learning, all learning depend on environment**

By Kathleen Driscoll

*"Our employees are expected to complete a lot of training courses. I find myself getting frustrated now that more and more of our training is online, rather than face-to-face. As they sit at their desks and click through their Web-based modules, my people complain about constant distractions, and it makes me wonder how much are they getting out of this training. Maybe I'm just old and cynical but it seems like a meaningless exercise. I'd rather have them do their regular jobs than waste time like this. Any thoughts?"*

It's easy to see why you think it might be a waste of time. If all they're doing is mindlessly clicking or dozing while they're doing it, then it probably is a waste of time.

One issue you're raising here is whether you're opposed to online training as a delivery method, or all training in general. "While employees might be able to 'do their regular jobs' without additional training, top performers look for ways to do their jobs better and to advance," says Judith Shenouda, owner of Shenouda Associates Inc., a Rochester-area business that provides communications solutions for businesses, including development and delivery of training courses.

"With training, employees become increasingly competent and skilled. The organization has that much more to offer its internal and external clients," she says. In addition, your organization's high performers are less likely to leave.

But in any organization that values training, the role of a manager like yourself is key, she says. "For any training-whether online or face-to-face-to be successful, the employees need to know that the manager supports the training and expects to see the results of the training implemented," Shenouda says. "There should be improved performance that in some way adds value to the team, the organization and the overall business."

The role of the manager isn't the only factor, however. To make training work effectively, your organization should create a "learning culture," says Patrick DiLaura, partner and president of Providium Human Resource Group LLC in Rochester. That would include having a budget for training, building professional development and training into the annual performance appraisal cycle, flexible work arrangements to allow for training on company time, and recognition and rewards for those who reach certain goals in their training, he says.

When e-learning programs first became popular, many people thought their companies would do away with instructor-led training, he says, but that's not the case. Many companies learned the hard way that e-learning or online training wasn't effective or always taken seriously.

"Some companies were doing it for window dressing, creating the perception that they were investing in the development of employees, rather than developing their skills."

In addition, there's a whole generation of adult learners who have not yet made the transition from instructor-led or face-to-face learning to computer-based or e-learning, he says.

So companies looking to save substantial dollars by offering online training have been disappointed.

"(E-learning) has not been this panacea solution some thought it would be," DiLaura says.

For many companies, training is evolving in a blended way, where a portion of a program is offered online and another portion is led by an instructor. Or some companies give employees the choice of taking a course online or through an instructor-led program.

"Many companies are offering both to meet the needs of the learner," he says.

If your company is making the switch from instructor-led programs to computer-based training, your company will need to manage the change—just like any other change your company would make, Shenouda says.

"It needs to be a coordinated effort and you have to get the buy-in of the key people." At the same time, it's also important to recognize that training is not the solution to every workplace problem, she says.

"Training employees to use a tool in an improved way will not have value if the tool is the wrong tool to do the job. Neither the employee nor the business will benefit."

So people from your company should be evaluating what's being taught, what relevance it has to the business and how the training should be delivered. Certain types of training, including training on procedures, compliance issues or certification-related topics, can be appropriate for online learning, DiLaura says, while other types of courses require more interaction between instructors and students.

To make computer-based training more effective, some companies allow people to complete the training from home or they establish separate rooms or labs for employees to use to log-in into training programs.

"There has to be time on the job to do that without distractions," Shenouda says.

Indeed, in an article on Workforce.com, author Karen Frankola offered managers a few tips on how companies can help ensure a high course completion rate for e-learning programs:

- Develop a culture that takes online learning just as seriously as classroom training. If it isn't possible to go to a training lab, then it might be worthwhile to designate several workstations for computer-based training.
- Do individual comparisons. By working with online education providers, some companies show charts of "percentage completion" by individual participants in training programs. Others create internal competitions to complete and pass online courses.
- Use managers as role models. If senior managers and others complete the online courses, others are more likely to do it too.
- Create a social component. Some experts suggest ways of assigning learners to meet with other learners during pre-work or other phases of an e-learning program. Some companies also provide perks such as free lunches to employees taking the same course to foster discussions.
- Track performance. When supervisors check performance, they can help determine solutions if an employee is lagging behind. If a manager doesn't know whether an employee has made progress, then there's little the manager can do to motivate or help.

Managers at Work is a bimonthly column exploring the issues and challenges facing managers. Contact Kathleen Driscoll with questions or comments by phone at (585) 249-9295 or by e-mail at [kadriscoll@aol.com](mailto:kadriscoll@aol.com).

5/11/2007 © Rochester Business Journal