

## 2006 Top 50 IT Training Companies - Rising Stars (Jul 06)



The world of IT training is changing, which could prove a golden opportunity for dynamic, young companies to take the market by storm. Barrie Charles looks at some potential future winners

The IT training industry is characterised by continual change, with newer, dynamic companies climbing up the Top 50 list. Once again we've looked at some of the smaller IT training providers to see if we can identify the rising stars who might be tomorrow's winners. Likely candidates were asked to submit a short summary of their activities to an independent group of judges who looked for evidence of high growth, innovation or excellence. Here are their top five.

### 01 Fast Lane

Fast Lane had barely been operating for a full year when we put them at number 3 in our Rising Stars list last year, but our faith has been more than vindicated as the company has grown by 250% to become the UK's second largest Cisco trainer. It now employs 12 permanent staff and around 15 contractors.

Fast Lane operates a public schedule in partnership with InterQuad at 12 centres across the UK, but major projects make up the bulk of the business. 'We tend to win the large ones because we have a lot of experience in our particular part of the industry,' says Peter Olive, MD. 'We're able to understand the requirements a little bit easier than some of our competitors.'

Fast Lane staff tend to be long-term Cisco market experts. New major contract wins have included EDS, MCI, Siemens and BT. Although the company specialises in depth rather than breadth of expertise, it has now diversified into the data storage area by becoming the exclusive UK training partner for Network Appliance (or NetApp), a £1 billion corporation with growth of around 30% per annum.

Fast Lane UK is one part of a global organisation that has also been expanding rapidly. New offices have been opened in China and Singapore to join the existing operations in Europe, the Middle East, the US and Australasia.

Olive believes that the advantages of being backed by such a widespread parent are not so much in their ability to deliver worldwide projects as in the resources that can be provided. The company has made major investments in technology for remote lab work in Berlin and its other data centres in Hamburg, Vienna and Dubai.

The size also helps increase its clout with Cisco, and Fast Lane is one of only two advanced technology partners in EMEA (the other is Global Knowledge). 'Most of the standard technology that Cisco partners teach is very commoditised now,' says Olive. 'Prices and margins have been driven down. So where we're going is to work more on the advanced and new technologies with Cisco.'

Fast Lane expects to be well up our Top 50 list of suppliers next year.

### 02 STAR Consulting

STAR Consulting started business in 1999 and focuses on the provision of managed training services (MTS). The company has no public course schedule of its own, but says it is not just a 'training broker' because it brings added value and maintains a close relationship with clients. Dan Sellar, operations director, cites the example of IT and telecoms firm Damovo, where STAR

staff answer the phone as Damovo Training and sit on board meetings to advise on strategy: 'We are on an internal extension number as far as they're concerned, they don't even know we're not in their building. We're fully integrated into the culture of the company.'

Around half the courses supplied to clients are in IT, but the rest can be anything. 'We've sourced courses in rooftop climbing, trailer-towing, forklift truck driving and even had requests for grave-digging courses,' says Sellar.

Client managers and staff have access to STAR's online administration system for course selection and management reporting, but Sellar prefers course booking to be done on the phone or by email. 'I like that level of human interaction. You can be so far removed from the process that the client doesn't feel that you're adding any value.'

STAR competes with the big players in MTS such as QA or Parity Training by offering a vendor-neutral service and independent advice to clients. 'We pride ourselves on being able to take on board their suppliers, do an analysis of the marketplace, make sure they're getting best value, and maximise the discounts that they get,' says Sellar.

### **03 Harbrook Training**

Harbrook Training is another Cisco specialist, concentrating on the provision of network management training and consultancy. The company was started by Andy Brooks and Neil Harvey in 1999 as a consultancy, and then moved into training provision for Atlantech, a Cisco partner and producer of network element management software. When Cisco bought Atlantech in 2000, Harbrook was asked to continue to develop and deliver the specialist training for them. 'We worked very closely with a number of the Cisco business units developing various specialist training courses focused on network management,' explains Andy Brooks, director of training. 'But one of our frustrations was that even though we were developing this specialist training, we weren't allowed to deliver the standard Cisco authorised training.'

In August 2004 Harbrook acquired the Learning Solutions division of Dimension Data to give them that capability.

The combined company now provides public scheduled training from centres in Leeds, Manchester and a new three-classroom facility in the City of London. They also provide Cisco training through Parity and Remarc.

Harbrook has also entered into a consortium agreement with Synergy Professional Services of Dubai, the leading Cisco trainer in the Middle East. This allows it to make use of Synergy's remote lab capability and also gives it Cisco Learning Solutions Partner status as Synergy's European arm.

A major competitive advantage for the firm is the close relationship that Harbrook still maintains with Dimension Data, a large supplier of Cisco products. 'All their sales and account teams funnel their training directly through to us,' says Brooks. 'None of the training that comes from Dimension Data's customers really hits the market. That's fairly unique.'

### **04 Assist Knowledge Development**

Assist was profiled as a Rising Star two years ago, but since then revenues have nearly doubled to approach £1 million this financial year. The company provides professional skills training, particularly for the British Computer Society's ISEB qualifications, a strong growth area. 'One of the factors behind our success is the increasing demand in the market for business analysis and systems development skills,' says Martin Pearson, marketing director. 'That's the area in which we specialise.'

The power behind the company comes from the directors, who are all experts in their field. For example, Debra Paul, Steve Skidmore and James Cadle have each produced important books in their respective subject areas of business analysis, systems development and project management; and Paul and Skidmore are also ISEB qualification panel members. Assist now employs 11 permanent staff and five associates.

ISEB qualifications are likely to continue to be in demand. The BCS has just launched changes to the diploma structure and new certifications in IT architecture and IT-enabled business change are planned. Assist is also working with the British Computer Society on a new higher qualification in business analysis.

'The market is going to continue to grow,' says Pearson. 'We think that everyone who has gone through our business analysis diploma programme will come back on the higher award when that's launched.'

Over the past two years, Assist has moved into the markets for software testing and project management, although growth in the latter has been limited. For the future, the company feels that it's better to concentrate on its core curriculum and expand geographically. It is currently investigating the idea of working with a training partner to take their courses to the US, with Canada and possibly Australia to follow.

'A couple of our clients have people in the States and have asked us to go over and train them. We think that's got to be the next step,' says Pearson.

## **05 Globaltech Solutions**

Founded in the UK in 1997, Globaltech is an IT end-user training specialist with an impressive client list in professional services, healthcare, banking and financial services. Like many providers, the company started out in the Microsoft and Lotus arena, but has since expanded into bespoke systems for enterprise resource planning and customer relationship management. The firm has no training rooms of its own and conducts all its classroom tuition on site.

Although initial contact with customers is often through winning project work, a major part of the business focuses on helping clients get more from their existing applications. 'We're crossing over lots of boundaries,' says Richard Ferris, MD. 'Our space is to take every application in a business, learn it, understand it, and then apply it in that business environment. The solutions that we now deliver are tailored specifically to each organisation.'

The company's aim is to establish long-term relationships. 'We effectively partner with a client,' says Ferris. 'We're an extension of their learning and development team, or we take it over in total as a fully managed solution.' This approach has led to a widening of Globaltech's offering into soft skills, induction training, graduate programmes and other areas. In addition, the firm also has a consulting division to advise clients on IT strategy and a recruitment arm to provide resources for projects and helpdesks.

Training programmes may use a mix of instructor-led, one-on-one, virtual-classroom or e-learning components. With many staff in professional and financial services spending much of their time away from the office, the company has found a ready market for five- to 10-minute online modules. 'You've got to be creative in how you reach people,' says Ferris.

Last year, Globaltech expanded outside Europe by opening an office in Sydney to supply the Asia-Pacific region. This financial year the company expects to see total revenues of at least £3 million. 'We're seeing a doubling of revenues over three years,' says Ferris.