VIRTUAL, INSTRUCTOR-LED PROMISE

Most companies already have delved into e-learning, so it is easy to forget the impact of this advancement. For Emerson Network Power Liebert Services, that impact is still fresh. “Virtual, instructor-led training (ILT) is the latest technology Emerson Network Power Liebert Services utilizes with its more than 500 service technicians in the United States,” says Director of Corporate Training and Development Doug Vidler. This type of training first launched at Emerson as a pilot program in spring 2011 for technicians in the field, who, due to the urgency and type of training that was needed, could not physically be trained on-site at the company’s learning center in Columbus, OH, Vidler explains. “Given their line of work in data centers, frequent training is essential to the job,” he notes.

The company needed a training program that would allow technicians to receive training while still in the field, increase additional capacity at the company’s learning center, and cut travel/hotel costs. “This type of training is tied to a higher-level strategy centered on blended learning,” says Vidler. “This new, blended component of online, plus the virtual classroom with an instructor, is self-paced, convenient, and efficient.”

The program includes an interactive session involving the instructor, participants, presentation materials, and technically
savvy demonstrations on equipment Liebert technicians work with daily, all at the touch of a screen. The software allows the instructor and participants to take breaks, answer questions, and control the speed of the session.

Since launching the program, feedback has been positive, based on evaluations from technicians utilizing the virtual classroom. “In our first training utilizing the virtual classroom, we were able to train 147 personnel in two days,” says Vidler. “Without this virtual training program, the travel costs, plus time away from the job, would have been upward of $100,000. This new training program represented a huge savings for the company, provided additional capacity at our physical training center, and provided technicians with more opportunities to complete training.”

WHEN AND HOW TO IMPLEMENT?
Once you have your new technology in-house, booted up, and ready to go, the question becomes how best to optimize it. For some companies, this process requires tinkering.

“Our two areas of biggest investment are in a single-source publishing platform and a workflow automation product,” says Jon Kaplan, director, Training Center for Excellence, Discover Financial Services—Customer Service and Consumer Banking. “The goal of the first product is to ensure that we can write content once and export a variety of assets from that content, including assets for classroom-based, Web-based ILT, and on-demand e-learning.”

The investment has been worth it so far. “We’ve managed to dramatically improve the quality of our content through our single-source publishing platform,” says Kaplan. “Over the next year, we will see an improvement in both cycle time and productivity.”

The next generation of training technology at Discover is educational gaming. “We believe work-based gaming will be a significant opportunity for all companies,” Kaplan says. “The next frontier will be in finding ways to use gaming techniques and technologies to improve learning, job satisfaction, and employee performance.”

While experimenting with newer innovations such as gaming, Discover is keeping its eye on using older technology more effectively. “Over the last 10 years, e-learning and Webcast technologies undoubtedly have had the largest impact on the training world. Together, they have reduced costs dramatically and improved overall convenience for learners everywhere,” says Kaplan. “Determining where, when, and how to use these new
platforms has presented challenges to many companies. Many training organizations are still finding the best ways to use Webcasts and e-learning to further company goals.”

Kaplan says he’s seen some common mistakes in the training industry. “In situations where cost pressures have driven companies to convert large amounts of ILT training to e-learning without regard for type of content, this usually has resulted in failure,” he observes. “Companies that have migrated relatively straightforward ‘knowledge-based content’ to e-learning but kept skills-based training as face-to-face training typically got it right.”

The secret to successful implementation? Kaplan says it is keeping customer needs in mind. “It’s imperative to constantly check in with your customers and assess how they view the use of technology,” he says. “If they don’t believe the technology helps them, it probably doesn’t.”

RIGHT TECHNOLOGY, RIGHT REASON
At Automatic Data Processing, Inc., the focus is on using new technologies that give its employees the tools at work that they are accustomed to using at home. “We are focused on mobile learning platforms,” says Sandy Stricker, ES Sales Learning & Performance. “It’s important that we mirror what our associates will want and need, and I think many of them expect to see tablets and mobile devices being used for learning.”

Webinars are another tool that allows for increased flexibility, Stricker notes. “We were able to train a year-long blended learning program and include international participants by combining e-learning (another win) with Webinars,” says Stricker. At the other end of the technology spectrum are podcasts, which Stricker says often fall short. “I attended several conferences and seminars where everyone was talking about podcasts, but I don’t know that any company really has had a successful large-scale deployment or that they’ve really used them for learning.”

Stricker says to consider whether your technology is matched well with the training it is being used for. “Make sure you’re using the right technology for the right reason for the right audience,” she says. “For example, putting performance support on an iPad for a salesperson in the field makes sense. They can quickly pull up the information they need, when they need it, right before a client call,” says Stricker. “But putting a three-hour e-learning program on an iPhone for a client service rep makes no sense. No one wants to stare at their iPhone for three hours.”

5 SIGNS YOU’RE NOT GETTING YOUR MONEY’S WORTH FROM LEARNING TECHNOLOGY

Martyn Lewis, a specialist in the design and delivery of live virtual training programs, and a former executive, senior sales executive for DEC Canada, author, and founder of Market-Partners and 3g Selling, offers training technology red flags.

1. Your learners are not engaged. This is not about whether learners turn up, or how they are scoring the “smiley sheets.” This is about how engaged they are. Are they enthusiastic that the offered programs address their needs, address them in an effective and efficient manner, and will make a difference in their performance?

2. The learning participants’ managers are not engaged. This is one of the most significant factors that contribute to the success of any investment in learning programs. Individuals tend to look to their immediate manager’s actions and words to judge the importance and urgency of any initiative. Managers can quickly kill or prioritize the importance of a learning program. Second, to support the participants’ development and learning goals, the manager needs to be actively involved as a coach. Without the coaching function, the learning likely will fail, and with it, the organization will witness a multiplying effect on results.

3. There is no organizational learning strategy and architecture. If an organization lacks a learning strategy that reflects its learning needs, and a clear approach to providing the right learning, in the most effective manner, to the right learners at the right time (the “architecture”), any investment in learning technology becomes more about luck than the likelihood of great results.

4. Behavior didn’t change compared to the plan. Learning results in changed behavior. Understanding the required behavioral changes and then measuring the success of the program at delivering those changes moves us away from subjective measurements to really understanding the return on investment.

5. The adoption shelf life is short. What is the “stickiness” of the behavioral changes? Do participants not only complete the program(s), but does the learning last? Does the learning motivate employees to change for a few weeks, or is there a lasting impact on the individuals and the organization? Effective learning results in lasting change, which, in turn, results in getting your money’s worth from learning technology.

PARTNER WITH THE RIGHT VENDORS
Another key to success is finding the right educational partner and technology provider. Cianbro Corporation, for instance, purchased an online assessment tool from the National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) to be used in the certification process of supervisors. “Computer response testing was successful and cost effective,” says Steve Pound, associate director, Workforce Development, Cianbro Institute. “This investment allowed us to test a large number of employees in a short period of time. In some cases, we had to provide computer use assistance, but overall it proved an outstanding learning opportunity.”

The company says another important portion of this effort, known as the Supervisory Summit, included asking all front-line supervisors to voluntarily take a Foreman Assessment Exam created by NCCER. The non-profit education foundation was created to develop industry-driven standardized craft training programs with portable credentials that help address the workforce shortage facing the construction industry. “Of the 276 employees attending the summit, 261 (95 percent) volunteered to take the assessment, and of this group, 254 (97 percent) successfully completed it and were awarded NCCER Forman Certification,” says Pound. These kinds of results—the right system, the right support to back up trainers, and impressive results for customers—help technology live up to its promise.