

Ready or not, here comes podcasting (Jan 06)

By Margery Weinstein

Who knew that the handy little omnipresent gadget that comes in a multitude of colors, is small enough to fit in your pocket, and yet still allows the guy next to you on the train to listen to annoyingly loud uploaded music, could be such a help to corporate trainers? Though still not in widespread use as a training device, the delivery of educational content via the Apple iPod, also known as "podcasting," is catching on.

Recently, *Training* has noticed several companies giving play to the new technology. One of those companies, the McLean, Va.,-based credit-card provider Capital One Financial Corp., currently boasts the use of 2,200 iPods in its Audio Learning program. By the end of this month, the company expects that number to be up to 3,000, says Michael Walker, senior manager of Capital One University. Currently, iPods assist an array of learning programming, including everything from leadership development to workshops on topics such as handling difficult conversations.

With close to 30 training programs making use of the iPod, Walker says the technology is another facet of its blended learning approach. One of the most common ways the iPod assists training is by priming students for classes with "pre-work," which consists of books or articles they are asked to listen to beforehand. Similarly, the technology also can be used to reinforce learning after the course is over, Walker points out.

For instance, for the workshop on difficult conversations, scenarios exemplifying what students learn in class have been recorded for iPod upload. "So, over the course of, say, six weeks post program, they have the ability to listen to a vignette each week; that helps them to reinforce, and asks them to think about how they're incorporating the principles they've learned," Walker says.

For the company's U.S. Card New Hire program, designed to provide instruction on the finer points of Capital One's U.S. Card division, new employees receive an iPod along with an assignment to listen to a recorded book as soon as they accept the job. The book is then discussed during their orientation week, including how it can be applied to their work with the company. "The iPod is a company asset," Walker emphasizes. "We consider it another tool in our arsenal, or belt, of tools to make our associates [employees] productive." As employees leave the company, they are expected to return the iPods, which are then recycled and given to another worker.

Despite the costs associated with distributing thousands of iPods to employees, Walker says it's a good investment for the company. "We initially had some monies that were allocated last year that we were able to use to purchase all those [iPods] upfront at a pretty substantial discount from Apple," Walker says. "We determined that as long as an associate was listening to roughly four to six hours of content outside the classroom, we broke even," he adds, pointing to the on-the-job productivity the iPod saves workers from losing since they are able to listen outside the office, whenever they have down time.

The iPod Incentive

For some companies, iPods are yet another way to reach out to top performers. Irving, Texas,-based hotel chain La Quinta, for example, has a leadership development iPod program tentatively scheduled for the second and third quarters of this year. The company, just acquired by equity firm Blackstone Group, is awaiting approval for the program from its new parent company, says director of training and organizational development Christina Parr.

In partnership with Dallas-based learning program provider Stagen Leadership Institute, La

Quinta created a leadership-development program that supplies up-and-comers with iPods to listen to recorded books, such as *The Fifth Discipline* by Peter M. Senge, which the company has uploaded for them.

While the program awaits final authorization from Blackstone, Parr says one way or another, podcasting likely will become part of La Quinta's training program.

Parr says she sees the iPod as the latest link in a chain of recent technological advancements that employees are now open to making part of their corporate life. "I think people are now getting comfortable with Blackberry, having e-mail at their disposal, for example, and I think podcasting is just the next stage."

Orientation Tool

While the focus of La Quinta's iPod program centers on its most accomplished employees, Framingham, Mass.,-based audio electronics manufacturer Bose Corp. sees the technology as a great way to reach out to new hires, says Michael McGinnis, head of manufacturing, education and development.

With the audio tours available to museum patrons in mind, the company, sometimes short-handed when it comes time to show new employees around, is developing an iPod-facilitated audio program to guide them through their new digs. Set to begin in March, the program will also have an interactive quality, McGinnis says. "An employee would get a 'road map' that would include a layout of our [manufacturing] facility with various points where they are told to stop and play a video or audio segment on that particular production line," he explains.

In addition to these presentations, participants may be asked to find answers to questions pertaining to the particular area of the plant they are viewing.

"So, they actually have to do some seeking out," McGinnis says. Given clipboards and paper to record their answers, new hires also will be given rewards for each piece of information they correctly supply. In addition, they will be encouraged to write down any questions they have.

There are no firm plans in place yet to use the iPod in any other capacity, but McGinnis says the company is intrigued by the idea of using the device for ongoing communication with managers.

Bose also has tentative plans to use the iPod in conjunction with its Bose Sound Dock, a set of speakers that plugs into the iPod so that small groups can listen to presentations, McGinnis says.

McGinnis also says he can foresee a widespread adoption of the iPod in corporate training because in addition to being effective, it's economical. "It's a tremendous tool to allow for a relatively inexpensive mode of targeted communication, so I don't see it as limiting itself to larger companies, and as the leaders in the industry prove its worth, I think the ROI on the iPod has very strong potential."