How E-Learning Works for Technical Professionals (Nov 09)
By Marianne Cherney

In thinking about technical professionals, such as IT staff, under what conditions does online training work best?

As we’ve seen at GoGogh.com and Dashcourses, the way many companies are shifting to e-learning is by streaming live instruction via webinars and other digital delivery systems, which doesn't always meet the needs of the professionals on the other end.

Technical professionals are recognizing that the quick progression of technology, combined with handling more work as businesses try to cut costs, means they need training that is better designed for their specific needs.

And just what are those specific needs?

Customize E-Learning for the IT Professional

Training professionals are constantly asked to do more work in less time to make up for the smaller workforce left behind by layoffs and downsizing. In addition, they have to keep up with technologies that are progressing and populating the landscape faster than anyone ever anticipated.

For instance, Barb, a training manager for a Fortune 500 global company in the southeast, watched as her 15-person training staff was reduced to two. These professionals are left with a steep learning curve and a limited amount of time to gain the knowledge they need to accomplish their daily tasks.

Live, instructor-led training (either online or on site) is still a good fit for some types of professions and businesses. However, many IT professionals today are finding themselves plucked from the face-to-face trainings to take care of mission-critical events. Unfortunately, the business need at that moment overrides the training need, and the technical professional is left without the foundational education he or she needs to continue successfully with the course once the event is solved.

On-demand, or self-paced, training sessions are often a much better solution for these kinds of business environments. Learners can access educational information on-demand, at a time that suits their schedule. The flexibility of on-demand courses enables learners to better engage in the material and ensures that they can completely build their knowledge from beginning to end through the coursework.

On-demand learning is supported by many training professionals, including Tom, a VP of IT at a financial company in the Northeast. After recognizing that classroom training was ineffective for his overworked IT staff—because they were frequently interrupted with emergency calls—he moved his group exclusively to self-paced training.

Finding The Right On-Demand Source

What should a company look for when evaluating a training vendor? Here are some factors that businesses need to consider.

First, find a provider that meets the needs of your online training challenges and understands the on-demand requirement. Finding the right training partner can be a challenge, as John, a director of training for a Global IT services company, experienced. John spent six months reviewing vendor proposals only to find that many training organizations thought that self-based training was taping a live online course and teaching it through an online technology.

Second, consider on-demand modules that are shorter. Many technical learners are leaning toward episodic learning that builds in short increments. The learning becomes more flexible, and the employee can squeeze in a session during lunch or before leaving the office in the afternoon.

This modular approach worked well for a Fortune 100 services company that requires its training courses to be shorter than one hour, and prefers courses that are 15 to 45 minutes long. Some training organizations even list the length of their sessions so the learner can choose a training that fits the amount of time they have available.
at a given time.

Third, it's important that attendees have access to the instructor both during and after the session. It may seem obvious to some, but many businesses overlook the question of whether and how instructors will be accessible to learners when they are evaluating e-learning providers and solutions.

With live instructor courses (both online and on site), the learning traditionally stops when the course is complete, which doesn't resonate well with technical professionals. Newer training organizations exist that allow for live Q&A with the instructor during the course, as well as ongoing Q&A for sometime afterward.

A high-tech company in the Northwest found that access to instructors during and after courses was critical, especially because many of its engineers were moving into technologies for which there was no existing expertise within the company. Additionally, some training organizations allow for interaction with other course attendees.

The ability to communicate with colleagues and the instructor during and after the module fosters a feeling of community that was not previously available and encourages advanced, active learning.

Fourth, it's important to consider what kind of hands-on activities will take place in conjunction with the course. Technical professionals need access to remote labs to experiment with what they've learned. This is separate from any modules the learner may be taking via an e-learning program that was developed using an authoring tool. It may come in the form of downloadable software or a program that lives in a virtual environment and allows for "testing" so instructors, students, and training executives can record results.

To make it a truly on-demand learning experience, this lab should be available to learners at their convenience, and to be most effective, should be available for some time after the online course has concluded.

Finally, businesses need to consider their budgets. Most technical professionals will participate in anywhere from one to two training courses per year, at an expense of about $1,000 per employee annually. Given the current economic climate, businesses are eager to balance their checkbooks against the need to provide continual education for their IT professionals.

Solutions exist that can accommodate the learner's need for on-demand content and interactive exchanges with instructors and colleagues while still reducing traditional live or online training costs.

Flexible Learning

Let's look at how some companies have taken unique approaches to successfully implementing on-demand training in the last year.

**Lunch and learn.** On-demand "lunch and learn" courses are ones that can be pulled up and repeated several times over the course of a week. Learners sign up for one of several lunchtime slots, and an instructor is available online during that week to answer questions as they come up.

Usually several employees are present at each lunch, creating a collaborative and lively session between learners and the instructor. Tom, the VP of IT that exclusively uses self-paced training, has found that his staff gravitates to the short delivery and casual atmosphere this approach offers. He also finds that these sessions open the door to expanded communication between areas that may have never interacted before

**Podcasts.** On-demand training can be delivered as podcasts. IT professionals are notoriously strong multi-taskers and regularly have the need to flip between screens on their computers or be away from their machines all together. For these individuals, creating on-demand audio training that can be pulled up at their convenience lets them keep working while learning.

This unique approach has proven especially helpful for personnel that have to manage long weekly tasks such as batch processing, or those who travel between multiple campuses.

**Half-day courses.** A multi-day course can be segmented into several half-day on-demand courses that are available over the span of several weeks. Employees can access the courses online at their convenience, again,
gaining access to the instructors online for Q&A.

**Mentorship.** Mentored learning sessions with a live instructor in conjunction with ongoing, on-demand e-learning or testing in the remote lab blends the best of both worlds: they save money on training and offer the first-hand touch of the instructor to answer questions.

The very best on-demand training courses and modules have incorporated rich content and sound instruction with the ability to communicate with colleagues and instructors both during and after the module is complete. The combination of expert teachers with the free flow of information at any time keeps learners from feeling isolated, or as though they are learning in a vacuum.

The strongest on-demand training vendors can help customers identify their needs, create or recommend courses that fit those needs, and typically offer a more affordable solution than live or traditional online instruction.

**About the Author:**

Marianne Cherney is CEO and president of two IT training companies, GoGogh and a related company, Dashcourses.

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