IT training gets an extreme makeover (Feb 13)

From movie-like videos to hands-on hacker contests, fresh approaches to skills development have gussied up the world of IT training.

By Cindy Waxer
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For Jerome Provensal, IT training hasn't always been a pleasant experience. In fact, "stuck-in-a-classroom training courses taught by semi-inspired instructors of uneven quality" is how Provensal, director of software development at ITG, describes much of his IT education.

The good news, he says, is that dull approaches to training are fast becoming a thing of the past. Instead, more and more companies are granting IT professionals access to simulated environments, cloud-based e-learning modules, high-quality video productions and even Hollywood green-screen technology to earn certifications, upgrade their skills and otherwise advance their careers.

There are a number of variables helping to push staid PowerPoint presentations into history's dustbin. "Innovative IT training programs got their start because of cost-cutting measures," says Kendra Lee, president of the KLA Group, an IT training and consulting firm in Centennial, Colo. As IT managers contend with shrinking budgets and skeleton staffs, many can no longer afford to enroll their workers in monthlong, off-site workshops. At the same time, new delivery mechanisms, such as cloud technology, are enabling companies to offer online courses anytime, anywhere, and at a fraction of the cost of on-premises programs.

Also driving innovation in the IT training sector is a new generation of techie. "New grads joining the workforce who have been raised on a diet of Khan Academy-type courses are more likely to embrace the bite-size video model," says Provensal, referring to a popular not-for-profit educational organization and website.

Video Killed the In-person Training Star

Provensal would know. In December 2011, he signed up for Lynda.com, an online training service that's wildly popular among techies because of its hands-on, all-you-can-eat approach. He has viewed videos on everything from Photoshop and WordPress to jQuery and data analysis.

At a starting price of $25 per month, Lynda.com members receive unlimited access to nearly 1,600 courses encompassing more than 85,000 video tutorials. These tutorials, which range in length from one hour to 20 hours, are led by experts in specific disciplines, rather than trainers, and have a decidedly movie-like quality to them. Each video is divided up into 10-minute chapters -- bite-size chunks -- that allow members to easily search for relevant content, or jump in and out of a training session for a quick SharePoint refresher or MySQL query.

It's a self-directed, piecemeal approach to training that's particularly appealing to today's typically independent, supervision-resistant techies. In fact, since launching its online training service in 2002, Lynda.com has enlisted more than 3,000 corporate clients and more than 2 million individual members. And content is always being refreshed, with nearly eight new courses every week.

"While it's always beneficial to have live instructors that you can ask for help, a lot of IT professionals are very good at teaching themselves," says Lee. "Actually, a lot of them prefer [video-based training]. They just like that environment."

Comic Relief

Content is also undergoing an extreme makeover in some surprising places. Consider Broadway Bank in San Antonio. In the past, Diana Huntsman, Broadway Bank's vice president and information
security officer, had a simple formula for teaching employees not to scribble their passwords on Post-it notes: "pages and pages of materials, a question-and-answer period and PowerPoint."

That was the case until Huntsman began rolling out Digital Defense’s SecurED program in late January 2012. SecurED is a series of 12 online training modules that are designed to help companies reduce the risk of security breaches. What makes SecurED different, however, is that Digital Defense partnered with Lou Wagner of CHiPs and Raising Hope fame, and Emmy award-winning comedy writer T. Sean Shannon to develop highly entertaining training modules. While there’s nothing funny about the topics tackled -- physical security, phishing, social engineering -- viewers are warmed up with a comedy skit before delving into serious subject matter. As a result, Huntsman says the SecurED program promises to be a pleasant switch from "humdrum" material to "humor that is really going to capture our employees' attention." In fact, Huntsman suspects that SecurED has the potential to become a powerful recruiting tool for the financial institution.

"As the younger workforce comes in, they expect something different from IT training," says Huntsman. "They expect training to be faster and more concise, so I think SecurED is going to be a very good way to accommodate that need."

Educational Experimentation

But for every fresh-faced college grad enamored with training videos, there’s an IT professional whose learning style is best suited to hands-on experimentation. Rob Wittes is that type of learner. CareerBuilder’s manager of business intelligence development, Wittes recently graduated from the company’s Leadership Development Series, a three-year, part-time program that offers training in finance, law, sales and marketing. Whereas traditional training courses are typically taught by in-house personnel, the Leadership Development Series, held in CareerBuilder’s Chicago headquarters, is led by professors from institutions like Booth University College and Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management.

Class size is limited to 30 students, and courses consist of a lecture, lab time and peer review. But it’s the program’s hands-on approach that makes it unique, says Wittes. Many class exercises involve breaking into groups to create a new product or service, and then devising a strategy for bringing that offering to market as a CareerBuilder competitor.

"There isn’t a portion of these classes where you don’t get hands-on work," says Wittes. "Everything is taught in a collaborative way that gives you exposure to other areas of the company and other employees."

Getting your hands dirty with real-world case studies and marketplace scenarios is critical to any IT professional’s continuing education, according to Lee. "The one thing that is most important for IT professionals is to have hands-on time," she says. "Training that is mostly listening just won’t work with techies."

Reaching for the Clouds

Providing techies with a crash course in business principles is one thing. Offering them hands-on training in areas such as app development or Web design, however, requires plenty of processing power and valuable IT resources. But cloud computing is changing all that, allowing trainees to experiment without draining IT resources.

"I can teach a class, Ruby on Rails, for example, and people can then deploy their application on the Internet using cloud resources," says Eric Presley, CareerBuilder’s CTO. "Training for technology professionals has moved beyond theory. Now they can actually try it, touch it, feel it and push it out for other people to see."

CareerBuilder has gone so far as to give IT professionals a day off -- and a financial incentive -- to experiment with new technologies. Every quarter, the company holds a "hack day" in which IT
employees are given 24 hours to work on anything they want outside the scope of their regular responsibilities.

"The entire IT department shuts down for a day and allows everyone to hack on any ideas that they want," says Daniel Cosey, CareerBuilder's director of information management. "This includes any training they want to get done -- a data inquisition, a new product idea or a new algorithm for our search engine." Here's the best part: The IT professional who presents the most impressive idea wins $10,000 and six weeks of paid work time to implement it.

By embracing self-directed IT training that involves competition among engineers and IT workers, CareerBuilder has created a program that's far more likely to have a lasting impact on participants than standard workshops, says Lee. "If training is entertaining, employees will pay better attention to it and what the message is," she explains.

**Obstacles Ahead**

Nevertheless, innovations in IT training can carry risks. For example, companies need to make sure that their network infrastructure is capable of delivering training videos across the enterprise. That's something Broadway Bank had to consider when it decided to distribute Digital Defense's SecurED training series across its 40 banking centers throughout the year. "I think we'll have to be careful about how we distribute SecurED," says Huntsman. "Fortunately, one of the things that Digital Defense did early on was put their training modules into the Quicktime format so they won't utilize a lot of bandwidth."

Another pitfall of adopting the latest training methodologies is the risk of attrition. Even if you invest thousands of dollars in training IT employees, there's no guarantee that they'll stick around -- especially since the training makes them more marketable. That's a risk companies simply have to accept, says Presley. CareerBuilder does. The company helps IT workers earn MBAs, offering full tuition reimbursements or paid sponsorships -- with no strings attached. "If they choose to finish their MBA graduate degree and then, in a month, leave the company, they still don't have to pay that back," says Presley.

But the risk of losing an employee or two doesn't seem to have deterred employers from embracing new approaches to training. Lynda.com reports that 5% of its members now watch its training videos on smartphones. While that figure might seem small, it has more than doubled over the past year and continues to rise.

It remains to be seen whether it will one day be commonplace for IT professionals to watch training videos starring Hollywood celebrities on smartphones. What is certain is that offering high-quality, creative training via a variety of delivery mechanisms is now a business imperative.

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