



## managing a work force

**Skills Training**

08/05/2009

### Latest Learning Trends

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*Virtual learning has come a long way in a short time. Where a decade ago only leading-edge organizations used virtual learning solutions on a regular basis today the practice is quickly becoming mainstream.*

#### Best practices

Consider that among organizations receiving 2009 BEST Awards for achieving enterprise-wide success through learning from ASTD (American Society for Training & Development), the world's largest association dedicated to workplace learning and performance professionals, a vast majority have programs that include virtual learning.

What's more, ASTD itself has embraced virtual learning in a big way. This year, for the first time, it offered a virtual version of its annual International Conference & Exposition.

The 2009 Virtual Conference, which took place the same days as the live conference in Washington, D.C., May 31 through June 3, 2009, allowed attendees to participate from the convenience of their homes or offices.

The event, which focused heavily on training, included orientation, 80 live webcasts, 15 videos of general sessions, showcased speakers and other selected sessions, networking sessions via conference call, a special LinkedIn community, and ASTD's Second Life community. There was also a "Live from the Expo" feature, which allowed virtual attendees to talk directly with vendors on the expo floor.

Feedback from Virtual Conference attendees was overwhelmingly positive. ASTD reports that 90 percent were very satisfied with the virtual conference experience; 80 percent would definitely or probably purchase it again; and 75 percent would definitely or probably recommend it to a friend or colleague.

And ASTD isn't the only training organization to get on the virtual bandwagon.

Starting in October, American Management Association (AMA), a leader in talent development and performance-based learning solutions, will offer live, instructor-led Virtual Seminars, which people will be able to access online at home or in their office. By year-end, AMA will make available five of its most popular seminars in a live virtual format.

The organization refers to the move as the next progression in its online learning platform. For several years, it has offered blended learning. Now, however, based on a preference for online, it is moving to an entirely virtual format.

### **Changing preferences**

It's a direction many organizations and companies are taking, according to Denise Persson, chief marketing officer for ON24, a global leader in webcasting and virtual event solutions.

In fact, ON24 has seen the demand for virtual conferencing increase by 100 percent, with corporate learning centers and large conferences alike moving toward virtual learning.

Some of it has to do with the economy, Persson tells *HRWire*. At a time when employees are being laid off and benefits are getting slashed, it's not fiscally responsible to fly people to remote locations for the purpose of education and development.

But going virtual also has to do with the direction communication has taken. People now interact professionally and personally online, using business networks like LinkedIn and social networks like Facebook, which in July announced it has more than 250 million members.

To say people are very comfortable online is an understatement. "It's the world we're living in today," says Persson.

The online world has come to dominate interaction so much that ON24 research finds people actually prefer virtual technology to live delivery for learning.

### **Technology advantages**

And of course technology itself facilitates the process, and provides the level of sophistication at which information can be delivered.

ON24, for example, has a platform upon which a large virtual conference or a corporate virtual learning center can be built. The completely customizable platform allows for individual organization branding and focus.

For example, one of the company's clients, the National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB), a leading association for small businesses, will hold a virtual conference in September around four learning tracks. NFIB will utilize webcasts, along with an instant-messaging type feature that allows participants to interact with presenters and one another in real time.

The conference will also feature a 3D auditorium with a stage and seats.

The 3D component, a standard feature available to all ON24 clients, is one Persson says learners find visually engaging and compelling.

Organizations use the feature in different ways. Persson tells of one client that has recreated a New York City street scene, complete with taxis and its corporate location.

Although this kind of environment is entertaining, the value goes far beyond visual stimulation. ON24 has found an interactive, 3D environment allows for greater engagement than providing real documents in a face-to-face, live environment or documents via the Internet.

People stay longer in the intuitive environment, Persson tells *HRWire*. "Customers think training is more interesting and more effective," she says.

Another positive aspect of virtual training is that it encourages participation because there is a degree of anonymity. ON24 finds that where people may be hesitant to ask questions in a live training session, the virtual environment provides them with a comfort level that inspires confidence.

### **Companies embrace environment**

All these factors coming together have contributed to a major shift on the part of training delivery. The shift is so profound that Persson expects soon every major corporation will have its own virtual learning center.

The learning center will deliver training to employees, but it may have customer service components as well.

Medical device maker Boston Scientific, for example, uses its virtual learning center, developed in conjunction with ON24, primarily to educate physicians and other medical professionals about its products.

Although a virtual learning center may sound far off into the future for some organizations, Tricia Heinrich, director of communications for ON24, points out that some people compare the evolution to corporate websites when they first started appearing years ago; today, nearly every company, regardless of size, has a website.

Heinrich says the new online growth area is the corporate virtual learning center.

The ability to create a very unique online presence is part of the draw. A company can replicate its corporate headquarters and campus, Persson says. "We're going to see this as the standard," she tells *HRWire*.

### **An edge for HR**

A virtual learning center gives HR professionals an advantage in attracting talent, according to Persson. Candidates interested in skills development and training view the offering as leading-edge. It helps with corporate branding, while serving as a preferred method of learning.

But from the perspective of delivering information to a global workforce the solution also offers HR and other management teams an advantage. Persson tells of an ON24 client

that recently gave a live presentation to employees in five countries. Employees in each country were able to simultaneously view the presentation in their language.

Tools that were fantasy-futuristic not that long ago are today readily available. These tools are changing the ways organizations communicate with and educate their employees.

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