**Training for Nonprofits: Using Technology Today**

*--Mary M. Rydesky, Transition Management*

Training - as beloved as apple pie, but costly and often lacking robust ROI (return on investment). How can we continue investing in personnel's knowledge and skills while making better use of time, travel expense, and budget?

Today's technologies broaden the array of delivery tools for training. Online classes, webinars, podcasts, and videoconferences are several that may help you cut costs while retaining the important inflow of new information. Online classes are frequently Internet-based, requiring enrollment to gain a password to protected systems, and may be just online reading assignments or more interactive, requiring learners to practice, reflect, and apply concepts. A general rule of thumb: the more the learner is asked to do in a course (the more interactive), the greater likelihood that information will be retained for application to the job. Beware the computerized page-turner course!

Webinars have become popular, using programs such as WebEx, GoToMeeting, LiveMeeting, GotoWebinar, AdobeConnect, BigBlueButton, and many other brands. These typically rely on a narrated PowerPoint, incorporating a chat space for participant questions, and some use of polls to engage or collect feedback at points throughout. Learners may stay at their desks or meet locally in groups to connect to others in remote locations, thereby avoiding travel time and costs.

Podcasts (and vodcasts, if visuals are incorporated) are mobile: the learner can load these on an mp3 player (iPod) and listen at any time. This format is terrific for information dissemination, but there is no poll, quiz, or other tool built in to engage the learner. As is oft repeated among trainers versed in adult learning, 'telling ain't training" and one way communication of information is a risky investment when you truly want learners to come away with new, useful, and applicable information or skills! Podcasts are well suited to overviews, information of changes in policy or strategy, and newscasts, but may be lacking if your goal is to be able to apply concepts or skills to a job after listening.

Videoconferencing calls on learners to participant as well as listen and watch. With video connections, trainers and learners can see one another (not just learners watching a trainer, as would happen in a television-like setting). With video, skills may be demonstrated, tried, and then demonstrated by the learners for evaluation by other learners and the trainer. With today’s move to better Internet connections, video is becoming more prevalent on computers, whereas earlier systems required a large cash investment in cameras and playback equipment.

Technology is constantly morphing to support better training. Yet one simple, common tool is often overlooked by organizations and managers, and that is the learning objective tool. What is it that you want the learner to DO post training? Can you state that in words that describe something you will actually see as they use the new information? Further, have you set up a system to account for the training and your expectations? In other words, when and how will you continue to reinforce use of the new information? For example, learners are often sent to courses on spreadsheet development, or customer service skills. But few are supported to use and show what they have learned on one or more occasions. Relying on the supposition that attending training equates to new skill is a fallacy that results in time and money expenditures with little return!

Using the 'technology' of clearly setting performance objectives for application of training, coupling this with manager accountability to engaging in a series of observations, and rewarding learners for productivity improvements creates a system for training to be 'worth' the time and funds. But this, too, can become a burden.

Learning management systems (LMS, LCMS, VLE, other acronyms are often descriptive of these) are tools to help organizations systematize - and reduce costs of - the management of their training. Look into Open Source systems such as Moodle, which is used world-wide by organizations of all kinds. While it is free (no licensing fees) and constantly enhanced and updated, you will have costs related to IT and instructional design expertise when you use it, but this is true of most any LMS. For more information, visit moodle.org, the home of the system, or contact [Transition Management,](http://www.transitionmanagement.com) a training and consulting group with expertise in implementing Moodle systems for nonprofits and other firms.

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