HIGH-TECH TRAINING FOR SMALL BUSINESSES-AVAILABLE 24/7

There's good news for owners of small-to-mid-sized businesses who want a better understanding of the technology they have come to rely on.

It's no secret that small businesses can gain big benefits by using Internet and computer technology wisely. Fortunately, there are now a number of online resources offered by major tech firms that provide access to information and insight that was once available only from consultants or in a classroom setting.

For example, HP offers business templates and images such as customizable, easy to use brochures, and letterhead, more than 35 how-to guides and over 160 articles that small-business professionals can download from its Web site: www.hp.com/sbso/. Select how-to guides include tips on creating marketing collateral, networking a color printer, and building cost-effective print, copy and fax solutions.

It also has an online learning center at www.hplearningcenter. com that offers free, instructor led classes where small-business owners can expand their knowledge and learn about wireless technology, networking solutions and more.

For those who want additional, on-demand training, the company offers Learning Curve. This service transforms a users' desktop into what's described as a virtual training and support center available 24/7.

Content is delivered via the Web and refreshed frequently, eliminating the need for many expensive on-site training programs.

Microsoft also offers a number of resources, including a Web site dedicated to the needs of small business owners: www.microsoft.com/smallbusiness.

Among the Web site's features is a calendar of free live seminars on small-business technology topics, offered by specialists from the Microsoft Connections team. These events are held in numerous U.S. cities during the year. Small-business owners can also sign up for free Web casts and training on technology issues. Within its Small Business community, small-business owners can participate with their peers in discussion groups, where topics range from how to configure e-mail systems to why some printers use USB cables.

The Web site also provides product information, plus tips and strategies for using Microsoft products such as Office and Small Business Server, and for marketing, management and other issues in running a small business. A major section of the site is dedicated to helping small businesses with computer security; this section includes security checklists, quizzes and interactive videos.

Another feature that small business owners find particularly useful is HP's online chat function for small businesses. It provides a real-time resource, where detailing the types of tech questions small businesses have and the areas in which they are spending their time and resources.

Users can also get instant technical help online with HP's "Ask The Expert." This live technical support is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

It makes it possible for users to chat live with HP technicians to help solve their most challenging business application or software issues.