



THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ONLINE TRAINING

Online training is known by numerous names and acronyms—computer-based training (CBT), web-based training (WBT), cyber-training, distance learning, e-learning, etc. By whatever name, online training is a method of delivering training through an electronic medium without the immediate presence of a human instructor. By taking advantage of technology, online training can be more cost effective by delivering more knowledge in a more flexible and efficient manner.

There are distinct advantages to online training that may apply to your organization. With an online training course you have the ability to consolidate education and training across geographical and time constraints. Courses can be delivered to people in different offices without the expense of travel and with less interruption of work schedules. For individuals with busy schedules, online training courses offer the flexibility of being available when the people are able to take the training.

This flexibility is the strongest facet of online training and the flexibility extends beyond scheduling. For many people, an online training course supplies material in a more palatable manner than instructor-led courses. This certainly isn't true for everyone, but the power of online training to help many people makes it an important tool for your training program. Online training is self-paced and includes interactive tutorials, questionnaires, case studies, self-assessment, and other features that easily assimilate to individual learning styles. Because people have more control over their training experience, online training offers the opportunity to learn in a non-stressful environment.

An online training course combines the advantages of uniformity in training and self-paced training. The basic course is the same for each trainee (while still offering you the chance to tailor instruction more easily) but can be delivered to different people at different times. While a human instructor is only available a limited time, online training materials don't "go home" and trainees can review the subject matter as needed or desired. Support can be supplied via e-mail or phone.

Online training most likely will not require any additional equipment at your location. Training is delivered through existing computers and an Internet connection. Most online courses will run through any Internet browser on any operating system. You will need to dedicate newer and powerful computers to the training if the course has graphics, sound or video. Don't make the mistake of using old castoff computers as your training computers. That will just make your trainees frustrated.

Still, being in an electronic format alone does not ensure that training is effective. How do you make the online training course effective for your people? To be effective, an online training course must be interactive without being messy. Bells and whistles are not always a benefit if they overburden the user. The course material and its interface should be streamlined. So, while you can incorporate video and audio instructions, interactive simulations, testing modules, and the like, the question you should be constantly asking is: "does this add to the substance of the course?" Does the way information is being portrayed supplement the learning object of a particular topic. If it does not add to the real content of the course and increase the knowledge of your trainees, then all of the flash and pizzazz will end up being more distracting than helpful. Likewise, always be sure that the learning interface, navigation graphics, and control buttons are easily understood and useable.

The self-paced flexibility of online training can also be a negative as well as a positive. Flexible should not mean unstructured. Yes, people can take the training when it fits their own schedule, but that schedule should still be a structured, set time, not just starting and ending when they feel like it. Thus, you probably want to have the online training course only available on computers inside a dedicated training room. Assign specific times for trainees to come for training in an environment where they can train undistracted. Really, your online training environment should be similar to an instructor-led training environment—a room conducive to learning and concentration where trainees can get the most out of their time.

When designed and carried out systematically and in an organized manner online training can be highly effective. Either as an addition to or a replacement for the face-to-face classroom environment, online training can be a strong part of your organization's training environment.

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