

Distance Learning for Workforce Development

Training: The Heart of Distance Learning

1. The World of Training

The amount of training that is available for use in home-based distance learning workforce development programs is staggering.

While the government has spent years pondering the values and uses of distance learning, the corporate world has gotten jiggy with it. Almost all major corporations use some form of “true” distance learning (meaning it is taken from a remote location) and absolutely all of them use computer-based training in one way or another.

Combine that with the vast numbers of higher-education programs that have completely integrated distance learning into their offerings and it’s not hard to understand why the training industry has been growing exponentially for well over ten years. It would be a challenge to find a sector of American industry and education that doesn’t have some type of computer-based training created for it.

The range of the computer-based training formats that are available is equally as phenomenal. From the very simple (i.e. slides that run with matching audio) to the very extreme (i.e. IBM’s video game style training for network engineers) there is as much or as little interaction in training courseware as you might be looking for – and everything in between.

2. Is This Distance Learning?

Distance learning technically refers to training that is taken from a remote location. It could be done over a computer independently, it could be done over the computer with a group, it could be done over satellite television... even the ol’ correspondence courses with books sent through the mail might be able to be classified as distance learning.

Generally people think of “distance learning” as being completely done over the Internet. But because your home-based distance learning project provides not only a website to go to but also the computer they’ll go to it on, you have the means to offer computer-based training as well as web-based or online training. And it would all be considered “distance learning” because it is being done remotely.

3. How Does Distance Learning Work?

It takes three main pieces of software to operate a web-based training course (and most computer-based training courses as well).

The first is the training course itself, which contains all the educational content, quizzes and tests. The second is the course player which “plays” the course and displays all the buttons and other functions needed to participate in the class. The third piece of software is the “Learning Management System” (LMS) which is the place your participants go to launch courses and see their progress and you go to put courses into curriculums, see your participants’ progress and review reports.

Some distance learning has its own LMS built into it, but most distance learning uses an LMS that is a separate piece of software (even if they’re selling it to you together).

The distance learning industry has established industry standards (AICC and SCORM) that all distance learning courses and LMSs should be built to comply with. This means that as long as you purchase compliant pieces, you should be able to run any training courses with any LMS that has corresponding standards (AICC with AICC and SCORM with SCORM – some, but not all, can do both).

Of course, you may find non-standard courses that you would like to provide to your participants. It may take a little technical effort between the courseware provider and the LMS company, but it is possible to work through making them talk to each other even though they are not built to the same standard. Set aside some budget for it (course and LMS integration). If the companies don’t already want to work together, money may be the only thing that gets them to do it.

There are training vendors that may refuse to work with other training vendors. This might occur when one vendor wants you to buy everything from them so they make working with multiple vendors seem difficult. The vendors may be in heavy competition with each other or know from experience that their products don’t work together. Although you may make the decision to work with only one of the vendors, know that there aren’t any overreaching technical reasons that would limit you to just one training vendor in your distance learning programs.

4. How to Select Training Courses

There are many different ways to categorize training courses. The two main differentiators are the content and the style that the content is presented in. Begin by understanding your own requirements about training. What requirements does your funder have? What requirements do your participants have? What requirements do you have?

Training Content: Training content is the educational material included in courseware.

A common starting place for the selection of training content is to develop a list of targeted occupations or high-demand industries in your area and search for training that introduces valuable skills for them. Involve local employers in your program by asking them for advice about training content. Allow them to review a list of the types of courses you are considering. Some employers might like to select their own personalized curriculum to recommend to potential applicants or for use by incumbent workers. Local employers may also be able to provide suggestions of or references for training vendors that they have successfully utilized.

An exceptionally good resource for information about the training requirements, educational requirements and occupational outlook for job and industries in your area is Career InfoNet (US DOL).

EXAMPLE: If you are doing a program for TANF participants, search Career InfoNet for demand occupations in your area. Look up the Skills, Knowledge and Abilities requirements for those jobs. Seek out distance learning courses that teach the sought after skills. Once you find some, check whether they meet the TANF definitions of vocational education, job skills training, education directly related to employment or GED training. You may need to obtain certification from your state or get on your local eligible training provider list to be approved in the TANF training category you are seeking. Ask your training vendor to provide you the detailed information you need for the state or local applications that you may need to file.

Another method of selecting training content is to consider the general education levels of the participant population and to seek training that matches those. If your target population has generally low literacy, make sure to research ABE and/or GED training. ESL courses are also available for limited English proficient participants.

Training Style: Training Style refers to the “flair” (multimedia) of how the training courses functions while it is being played.

Styles vary widely. Some courses may be just text slides with audio. Some courses may have lots of video clips. Some courses may have extreme animation - like a video game. Some courses may involve connecting to a live auditorium. Be aware that the more “flair” there is, the more likely it is the training will require high-speed Internet access to use it (you may decide it’s worth it to pay for high-speed) if it’s not running off the computer. Also, training with lots of “flair” costs much more to develop than simple training, so expect higher prices.

Consider your participants when selecting training styles. Older participants with little (or no) computer experience may be greatly distracted by the bells and whistles of common technology “flair.” If you want someone to learn the skills to use Microsoft Word, it might be better to allow them to focus on the content using a simple style of training than to force them to learn how to play a video game in order to get to learning about Microsoft Word.

It's generally believed that the younger your target participants are the more "flair" you should seek in training courses. Young audiences are remarkably comfortable with technology (even those who have only experienced computers at school) and their ability to quickly assess how to use it (even without directions) is uncanny (just watch a kid with an Xbox 360).

If you are attempting to serve a cross section of adults and youth, err on the side of a style that works for your adults (or have both). Youth will adapt more easily to whatever environment you put them in and establishing a streamlined professional environment for your training helps youth understand the "business" of the world of working. Your distance learning should be engaging, but it doesn't need to be the next MTV website.

5. What It Takes to Run the Training

After you have selected your training, you need to make sure your hardware, software and Internet connections meet the requirements of the training. Specific items to watch for and/or ask about include:

- A. Will the training launch from your Learning Management System (LMS)? Are the courses and the LMS compatible standards or will the two vendors work together? You may have to go to multiple places to find the results of your home based distance learning program if some of your training won't run through your LMS.
- B. Does it need a high-speed or broadband internet connection?
- C. Does it need a CD or DVD in the media player to run?
- D. What software does it need to run? (Flash, proprietary players, Windows media player, etc.)
- E. How much memory does it need to run?
- F. If it's computer-based, how much hard drive space will it take up?
- G. If it's computer-based, what type of processor speed do they recommend?

Because it is critical that your training, computers and Internet connections work together, you should test any unproven combinations before you make any final purchasing decisions.

6. Effective Uses of Training

Home-based distance learning workforce development programs can use training in a variety of exceptionally effective manners.

Make sure you use the magic of technology to assign each participant their own, carefully selected for them, curriculum. Use assessments (including learning style assessments), career aptitude tests, interest inventories and other tools to assess what they need and give

it to them. (Those assessments can all be a part of your distance learning program, by the way...) You don't have to wait for semester start dates or class openings. Take advantage of your ability to be creative and specific!

When you purchase training courseware, you'll usually buy course libraries which can include hundreds of courses that can be arranged in curriculums as you want them. You don't have to have all your curriculums set up in the exact same way (perhaps one version of your Office Clerk curriculum includes basic reading and basic math and one does not).

Involve employers in the creation of curriculums available through your program. As mentioned above, some employers might like to select their own curriculum to recommend to potential applicants or for use by incumbent workers.

Consider "just in time" training. This is training that is available for participants to access in the event that they find they need it on the job (or for school or community service). Perhaps their boss tells them they need to improve their filing skills. Or maybe they see a job posting for a better job in another department that requires Excel skills. Maybe knowing how to use Microsoft Publisher to make newsletters would make them a superstar at their office. Give your participants access to your training libraries so that they have a simple and immediate way to access training beyond just what you assigned them in a curriculum.

MAKE YOUR OWN TRAINING. Oh yes, you can. Now there are software programs that will help you create AICC or SCORM compliant distance learning courses in very simple steps. You may not be ready to create a new validated IQ test (or maybe you are) but consider the value of having your program orientation, funding requirements or other important information for your participants available in the form of a distance learning course. You'd even know what grade they scored on it. You could assign it to every curriculum. If you were really great at course creation, you might even be able to sell your courses to other home-based distance learning workforce development programs. Program income anyone?

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Since 2000, Business Access has implemented 63 different workforce development home based distance learning programs placing computers in homes reaching over 17,000 people in three states. Program participants have spent more than 800,000 hours online and taken more than 50,000 courses through Business Access' online learning communities.

Programs include: TANF, WIA Adult, WIA Youth, Food Stamps, Career Advancement Vouchers, Individual Training Accounts, Foundation sponsored, U.S. DOL's Women in the 21st Century grant, NEG, Military Spouses, and others.

In a study by the Texas Workforce Commission TANF participants utilizing the system were nearly 3 times more likely to be employed after exit and earned an average of \$1,118 more in the first post-exit quarter than TANF clients in other programs. This study included regression analysis.

In a study by the Sloan Center for Innovative Workforce Training and Development and Rutgers University Center for Women and Work, post-TANF participants in New Jersey were found to have 92% program retention and an average of 14% earnings increase.

Independent results compiled by the rural Concho Valley Workforce Development Board showed 156% earnings gains and 90% participation.

The Business Access In-Home Learning System has been noted in the last two reports of U.S. HHSC Urban Partnerships for Welfare Reform, a consortium of 26 major cities representing the majority of the TANF population nationally. It has been recognized by HHSC Peer Technical Assistance, U.S. Department of Labor (JETTCO) and the National Association of Workforce Boards.

It has been independently studied by Rutgers University Center for Women and Work, the Sloan Center for Innovative Workforce Training and Development, the University of North Texas and the Texas Workforce Commission (twice). It has been featured in National Governors Association materials and received other accolades.

The In-Home Learning System is a technical platform for the online delivery of workforce development services. Online communities are localized and include multiple training vendors, content providers and resources. Automated systems manage workflow addressing the issues of computers, Internet access, help desk support, advocacy, reports and communication with government entities. Business Access holds U.S. Patent # 6629843 for the In-Home Learning System, called "Personalized Internet Access." For more information please visit: <http://www.business-access.com>