

TRAINING

Campfire educating goes high tech

When times are tough, training budgets are the first to go

WHEN new technologies arrive, training is paramount. The budget responsibility for training was typically with human resources, some with the IT department. A curious intersection has recently occurred with 'on-line learning' where the human resources and IT departments must work jointly to implement what has become a 'techno-business' solution.

Let's look back first. Traditional training was split into 'inside' and 'outside' needs. 'Inside' training, which addressed how the company did things, was either done at internal sessions held by experienced employees or 'on-the-job' by doing the job and 'gathering around the campfire' to ask questions of the veterans. 'Outside' training, which addressed new skills and information, was accomplished either by attending off-site courses or seminars or inviting in a trainer. The separate camps of 'business' and 'IT' would typically act independently to find their solution.

Moving into the second half of the decade, IT departments are trying to find more costs to cut to maintain company-wide operating margins. Hardware and platform standardisation was one of the first actions to minimise IT maintenance costs. Falling costs of new hardware created an easy budget win for technology managers. And, those upgrades required very little business level involvement. The IT departments could simply port existing applications over to more efficient computers.

The next step in cost reduction was business process improvement. Traditional companies, organised by functional groups or 'silos', asked their management teams to look outside of their individual group's function and

focus on the entire company-wide business processes. A limiting factor quickly emerged; a specific type of resource was needed that could see across business silos AND also grasp the technologies e.g. ERP systems. These people were difficult to hire or grow internally. Specialised consulting groups flourished.

So, HR and IT ended up with the same problem. Where would one look inside the company for these unique people? Or from where would one hire? The campfire opportunities are shrinking as older employees retire, limiting the chances for new employees to listen to the old timers about how things actually work in the company. These sessions are important to learning how the core business processes evolved. What if this knowledge and experience could be captured and made available in a more efficient manner to more people within the organisation?

Traditional classroom training, in-house or off-site, is limited by the availability and abilities of the live instructor. They can only reach a limited number of people. Campfire sessions were rarely recorded and were thus one-off random events. And there are the traditional costs of each. But, new education technologies – which had the faddish 'eLearning' dotcoms as a precursor – are coming online that make it easier, faster and less expensive to capture training sessions. The real bonus is that the digital result can be readily captured and distributed via the Internet to far-flung employees.

Techniques range from the simple – Internet group teleconferences, the same with slides on the Internet via the WebEx service, video plus slides using Windows Media Player, RealPlayer or QuickTime, to the more costly: studio webcasts and edited digital video streaming.

Because of reluctance to abandon traditional methods, 'blended eLearning' is the preferred buzzword – the proper mix of in-person and on-line sessions depending on the needs of the employees and the content.

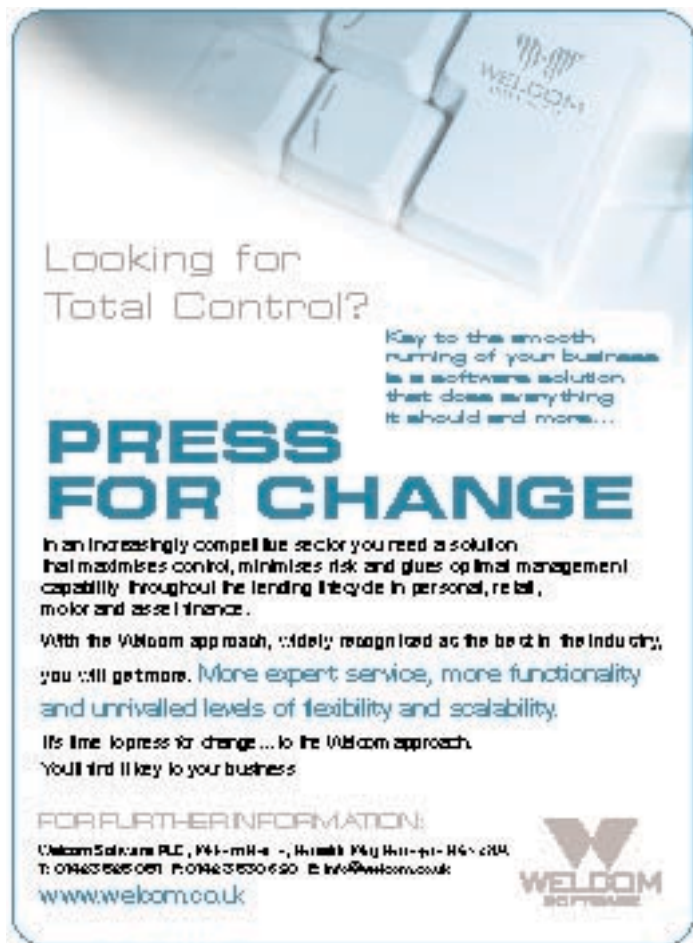
The challenges today include establishing a standard training-creation method, managing the trainees and providing feedback and interaction to on-line training. The technology platform is also a key decision.

Some of the pitfalls that have surfaced include employee resistance to capturing and viewing the on-line method, inadequate bandwidth for on-line delivery and lack of executive commitment. In addition, some early adopter companies have spent large sums on early eLearning

platforms without clear objectives leading to poor investment returns.

But with all of the above issues taken into consideration, the potential cost savings and long-term knowledge benefit of some form of blended on-line training should still be recognised as a worthy objective. Pilot projects should be considered prior to any large scale implementation. A typical small pilot project using these new technologies will require an investment of about £15,000 (€22,200).

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