Web-Based Training: Can It Work for You?

Few Internet initiatives offer the potential for an immediate return on investment like a Web-based training program for employees. It is estimated that approximately $60 billion annually is spent on training employees by firms in the United States and Canada. But since only 20 to 30 percent of that training is still used by the trainee only a short while after the training is completed, there is an economic imperative to maximize the utility of every training dollar spent. And Web-based training offers your company that opportunity.

Here’s an example: The costs of training are high. For example, it is estimated that it typically costs $8,000 to train one sales rep (or cook or mechanic) at a three-day, instructor-led course that brings together participants from scattered locations. That’s $1,500 for an instructor, plus travel, hotel and per diem for trainees. Then there’s overhead associated with the venue (for example, PCs, LCD panels, overhead projectors, etc.) Furthermore, there are the opportunity costs of having the trainee away...
from work (such as lost revenues from not being able to tend to job responsibilities/customers). With any reasonable number of trainees, there are also time costs—how long would it take to train or retrain a group of 100, 500 or 1,000? This can't be done all at once with traditional classroom training.

**More Cost-Effective Training**

Internet training can help your company’s bottom line, not only by shortening your training time lines, but also because online capabilities offer substantial savings over more expensive traditional seminars—no facility costs, travel expenses, hotel or meal expenditures. You even save on the cost of an instructor. It reduces your development time and costs, and it eliminates the expense of republishing and distributing training materials.

With Web-based training, employees can take all the practice time they need to learn new skills or behavior, with feedback—time that may not be available in a classroom. Some computer-assisted technologies also promise to make training simpler as well as less expensive. Some say that computer-based training (CBT) is more effective than traditional forms of training and can lead to greater learning retention and improved performance. Many studies have documented the potential savings in time and costs that can be achieved through implementation of good Internet multimedia instruction. Multimedia training is a type of computer-based training that uses two or more media, including text, graphics, animation, audio (sound/music) and video. In practice, multimedia uses as many of these media as is practical to produce a colorful, engaging program delivered via the computer.

Perhaps the most compelling data with respect to the difference between CBT and traditional classroom training across applications, content and audiences is that the Internet multimedia approach save
time. Anywhere from 25 to 50 percent, with most reports showing a 35 to 45 percent decrease. This savings is achieved with equivalent or better learning gains in terms of retention (remembering what was learned) and application (using what was learned). In an analysis review by the U.S. government of more than 40 different studies in industry, education and the military, researchers found that approximately 31 percent savings in time was achieved when Internet multimedia training was compared to equivalent classroom instruction.

WBT is here to stay. Many companies that previously regarded WBT as a temporary phenomenon are now offering online training programs because of the savings, flexibility and interactivity these courses can provide. The business of delivering WBT is steadily increasing. The popularity of WBT programs is growing at such an enormous rate that about 500 commercial products are now on the market for online learning. Experts predict that the next major shift in the training industry will be the hybrid approach: combining instructor-
led training and technology-based multi-media training.

Is WBT for You?

Is your company ready for a WBT delivery solution? Despite the excitement and glamour associated with delivering courses over corporate Intranets and/or the Internet, leaping in precipitously without analyzing precisely what needs to be done and how it could lead to disaster. Given today’s need for the human resources department to justify training costs, provide evidence that training and development contributes to business success, link training intervention with the bottom line, and calculate the strategic value of training, why start down a path that could be doomed for failure?

One concern with technology-based learning is the evaluation process. If your company spends money on computer-assisted training programs, how do you know these programs are effectively training your staff? A common question asked about both methods of training is whether the benefits can be measured to justify the money spent to implement them.

Some companies turn to vendors for answers, while others turn to feedback from employees. It is important to ask vendors whether their program has the means for effective evaluation. Or, if this product is proven to have good evaluation results, then what makes their product better than that of a competitor? To get the right answers, it’s neces-
sary for your company to look beyond any marketing pitch that comes with the selling process to get to the truth. Research shows that trainees tend to get more out of interactive learning than learning that is given via classroom format. This is especially the case because traditional training programs tend to have a passive impact on attendees—as they often teach theory, rather than a hands-on approach.

Factors to consider when deciding to adopt web-based training are these:

**Who is being trained?** What is the culture of your organization? What is the value to your organization of the informal interaction among employees, often from different offices, as a result of coming together for training? If this kind of rapport is highly valued, you may not want to go ahead with WBT. In addition, consider whether your organization can accept WBT. Even though CBT has been around for awhile, not
everyone is ready to accept non-instructor-led training.

If the size of your organization is small, it will be difficult to justify the investment. WBT becomes most cost effective compared to classroom training when there are 200 or more people to be trained, for training fewer people, the cost of course development, delivery hardware and production hardware/software is more expensive than traditional classroom training.

**Trainee characteristics.** Trainees that succeed in WBT are self-disciplined, independent, responsible and not easily distracted. While WBT does offer the flexibility of learning anytime and anywhere (such as at home), the amount of potential distractions (bosses, co-workers, children, television, to name just a few) versus a traditional classroom are enormous.

**The subject being taught.** Hands-on topics, like operating a forklift or hanging wallboard, are not well suited for WBT.

Consider the stability of the course content. Training topics that cover laws, regulations or procedures that are apt to change frequently are perfect for Web-based delivery because the subject matter is relatively quick and easy to update. If content consistency is important, Web-based delivery is ideal. Technology-based instruction is delivered in a consistently reliable fashion that does not vary in quality from class to class, school to school or from one location to another.

**Curriculum complexity.** Topics that are highly complex (like surgical procedures) can be better taught in more traditional settings. Consider special equipment requirements for students enrolled in the course. If special software or machinery is required, online learning may not be the best approach.

**Your technological infrastructure.** Consider the capacity and limitations of your network, Internet and Intranet connections (bandwidth). Without technology for production or ready access to Web
servers, WBT will be difficult to implement.

**Technical support.** Computer help desks will be a necessity to accommodate the large number of employees who will be logging on for training. Does your organization have 24-hour-a-day toll-free technical support available by phone? If your WBT will truly be utilized anytime and anywhere, the trainees will need that level of support.

Consider whether online course delivery is aligned with your corporate vision or mission. Consider the kind of commitment management will provide, especially in terms of funding. If your organization tends to be flighty when it comes to funding technology that has a relatively short shelflife, WBT may not be a wise initiative. Consider your organization’s feelings toward high development costs versus delivery costs. Technology-based instruction tends to be much more costly to develop than to deliver. If the employees at your organization are unionized, consider the level of union/labor support you have. Labor union contracts dictate not only who gets training, but also where and when that training takes place.

Consider how much time has been made available to you in relation to when the training must be launched. If management will support a Web-based training initiative but only gives you one month to implement it or they may change their mind, WBT may not be the best choice. Naturally, consider the number of designers and “techies” you have in-house for development. If there are none, you may not be a good candidate for WBT until you remedy that situation. Finally, carefully consider your team’s spirit. If there is a lack of enthusiasm or interest among those who are responsible for initiating the WBT, you might want to reconsider.

**The Bottom Line**

Concluding that your company is not ready for WBT is not the end of the world. Some businesses do very well in a low-tech environment. The nature of
their business and trainees does not necessitate utilizing technology to deliver their training. There is nothing wrong with your company if you don’t need WBT!

For companies that are candidates for WBT, remember that you must be comfortable using technology. You must have the funds and technical support readily available to meet today’s needs, and the resources available to expand your technical capabilities for tomorrow.

There is no simple answer as to whether technology-based training is the best solution for you. Do your homework. Talk to other companies that use both technology- and traditional-based training. Assess the advantages and disadvantages, and draw your own conclusions as to what will work in the specific situation facing your company.

About the Author
Milton Zall is a free-lance writer who specializes in taxes, investments and HR/business issues. He is a Certified Internal Auditor and a Registered Investment Advisor.