

Don't let a slowed economy stop your IT training program

By Michael Bills

Depending on who you listen to, the economy is at, or nearing, or maybe just moving off the downside of a business cycle. The high side of this cycle was powered by innovation, increased worker productivity, and a seemingly boundless enthusiasm for investment. All of that has changed - almost. Companies now focus on the sales that were promised by technological innovations and emerging markets, while tightening budgets and slashing head counts to remain competitive. But technology never sleeps. As we do more with less, keeping worker productivity rates at historical highs, budget constraints are choking one of the core drivers of the good times—education that keeps pace with technology.

Traditional off-site IT training may no longer fit your budget. The costs of a training facility, a skilled instructor, and the proper courseware for a typical class quickly add up. And, if you must travel to the training, adding lodging and other related expenses, the costs surge. So, how can a company support staff training in lean times?

Get flexible. There are many alternatives to off-site, instructor-led training. Each offers some advantage, but involves trade-offs as well. You must carefully analyze your needs, and weigh the pros and cons of training approaches, before choosing the one right for you.

If you have the space and the necessary equipment, it may be possible to conduct classes at your own facilities, with a training company supplying the instructor and materials. This eliminates travel-related expenses and

the cost of using another facility. Requirements at your end increase though, as you assemble equipment, load and test necessary software and files on your network, and dedicate space for the class.

There are also several self-study options for highly motivated students. An individual learner can choose from among dozens of quality textbooks available on IT topics, or elect to use interactive computer-based or web-based training modules. The individual approach offers great flexibility in terms of when and where training can take place, and the costs are relatively low. A textbook might typically sell for under \$100, with CD and web-delivered tutorials rising to a few hundred dollars. The common requirement in any style of individual learning is a self-motivated learner. But even where learners want to do the necessary work, outcomes can vary highly. And, if a student gets stuck or doesn't understand the next topic in the lesson, there is no instructor available to explain or help discover the proper next steps.

Education professionals agree that instructor-led training is the most productive method of instruction. Even an advocate of blended learning, such as Paula Moreira, vice president of Integrated Learning at a national training company, where instructor-led and self-paced study options commingle, states the axiom: "By far, the most preferred method for IT training by individuals and enterprise training managers is traditional classroom learning."

Is there a way to get the benefits of instructor-led training without hiring an instructor? One tactic that innovative IT companies are using is to leverage in-house subject-matter experts to deliver training to co-workers. Of course, not all technically savvy workers will be good instructors. A manager will need to assess the style of information transfer in their top staff to select likely candidates. Perhaps you've seen a staff member who

regularly helps co-workers solve problems, or acts as a mentor to junior staff. Your best trainer may already be on your payroll.

Using an in-house resource to deliver training offers many benefits. Scheduling flexibility is greatly increased when you do not have to coordinate with third-party providers. Current and upcoming projects can be used as the focus of the training class. And, since all attendees as well as the instructor are employees, proprietary information can be freely exchanged without fear of leaking intellectual capital to outsiders.

With a knowledgeable staff member willing to deliver training, the remaining challenge is to secure training courseware that meets the needs of the students and your instructor. Look for courseware that is both reference and tutorial, that offers hands-on exercises, that provides presentation aids for the instructor, and that has a flexible design so lessons can be tailored to your immediate goals and so the instructor can add their own invaluable real-world experience to the class.

Be aware too, there are programs offering training incentives to Front Range-area companies to improve the employment opportunities for Coloradoans and enhance Colorado's competitive position among states. The Colorado Office of Economic Development & International Trade and the Community Colleges of Colorado administer grant programs for qualified companies. For additional information on programs, and application information, contact the offices of the Business & Industry Center at Front Range Community College.

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