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Don't Forget the Web

Web-based training eases the learning curve and enables users to get the most from their customer relationship management solution.

By Gabriella DiGuglielmo

Greek philosopher Aristotle gave this advice: "What we have to learn to do, we learn by doing." For users needing to learn a new software application or new features within an existing application, hands-on learning breeds comfort and familiarity. While customer relationship management (CRM) systems can be a great boon for business productivity, users not properly trained can render the system useless. Therefore, many organizations incorporate face-to-face (classroom) training to bring users up to speed and enable their system to fulfill its intentions of easing information management and improving productivity.

Learning a new software application—or managing changes within an existing system—can be a frustrating and daunting task, even when complemented by an instructional course. Sometimes users are learning to navigate their new organization in addition to a new system and can feel the effects of information overload. When initially learning computer systems and software functionality, there is no substitute for classroom training, which provides the ability to ask questions and receive personal assistance from the classroom trainer and facilitators. To help guarantee long-term success, refresher and retention courses are highly recommended. However, increased travel costs and reluctance to take representatives out of the field for refresher and retention computer training are two roadblocks to the success of incorporating offsite learning into the training curriculum.

Web-based training coupled with face-to-face (classroom) training offers an innovative, practical, and sustainable solution to introduce new topics, applications, or enhanced system functionalities to the sales force in a convenient, cost-effective platform, while enabling the tracking of key information. Web-based training can increase system knowledge and familiarity and also can be used to educate the sales force on other business-related issues. By offering users the opportunity to learn at their convenience and at a pace comfortable to them, Web-based training can maximize the potential of the CRM system, enabling the sales force to increase productivity and effectiveness, and allowing businesses to get the most out of their software application.

Course Curriculum

A key advantage to Web-based training is the creation of curriculum content specifically tailored to meet each organization's training needs. One way in which organizations can expand learning opportunities through online technology is to offer pretraining classes that preview what will be taught in a classroom setting. Many times, representatives attending classroom training are anxious about what they need to learn and fall victim to stage fright when faced with a new system, even under an instructor's guidance.

Pretraining, offered via a Web-based module, delivers a "sneak peek" that helps users gain familiarity with the system prior to instruction and raises their confidence and comfort levels for on-site learning. Preparing sales representatives ahead of time increases their comprehension levels and helps maximize classroom instruction.

Product launches provide another valuable opportunity for Web-based training. Every time a new product is introduced to the market, representatives need to learn about product specifics and market positioning. For pharmaceutical sales reps, online training enables them to master the ability to provide product detail to physicians. Reports generated by the system ensure that key product points are consumed and understood.

Refresher courses developed so users can review their initial training and reinforce key points covered during classroom training are also a valuable use of Web-based training. While it may be cost prohibitive to conduct refresher classes at a physical site, Web-based training offers a cost-effective solution to boost comprehension and maximize an organization's existing technology investment.

Other topics that lend themselves to a Web-based training course include sales techniques, compliance training, and standard operating procedures.

Multiple Benefits

With the proliferation of high-speed Internet access—Nielsen/NetRatings data reports U.S. broadband penetration among active Internet users grew to 78.45 percent at the end of last year, and 92.29 percent of U.S. workers were on broadband—Web-based training is a viable solution to overcome training time and travel limitations. Computer- or Web-based training presents current content in a structure that allows users to learn at their own pace, in the comfort of their home or office, or anywhere they have a high-speed Internet connection.

In addition to the personalized pace, Web-based training for representatives delivers multiple benefits to the organization. For one thing, it is economical. Employees interested in a refresher course no longer need to board a plane or incur hotel expenses. Instead, they can gain access to a comprehensive program right from their desktop or laptop. In addition, representatives continue to spend uninterrupted time servicing their accounts, instead of spending valuable time occupied with offsite training.

Web-based training also offers the benefit of repeatability. Users can continue to repeat a class until they have absorbed the material. Assessments at the end of each course test the user's level of comprehension, and reports deliver insight to management as to the length of time it took for a user to complete a course, their assessment score, and status on courses they have completed or have yet to fulfill. Web-based training also delivers coextensive content to every representative taking a particular course every time. Messages are consistent, and report analysis can identify areas requiring further clarification.

Web-based materials also are current, and new content can be added as it becomes available. Software tends to change rapidly, so when changes are made or new functionality becomes available, training content can be uploaded, enabling representatives to immediately and confidently begin using new features. Without Web-based training, users would have to rely on learning how to use new features on their own or absorb information from general e-mail communications, in place of formal training, limiting the potency of advanced functionality.

Web-based training is highly measurable and provides management with key metrics regarding training. The reporting functionality increases accountability because users know their training is tracked and scored. By seeing who has completed training and how well they did, management can gain visibility into the process and the clarity of the information being presented. They also can determine how well the content is being received by analyzing representative scores, how often a course or question needs to be repeated, and the length of time needed to master a particular topic.

Scalability is another benefit of Web-based training. No need to worry about reserving space or renting and choreographing computer terminal learning stations. Whether an organization has 100 or 1,000 users requiring training, a training

partner with a dedicated DS3 broadband line can handle many users simultaneously, without compromising speed or image quality.

Ready to Enroll?

Whether you're interested in delivering training on system features and functionality or sharpening skill sets such as selling techniques, look for a Web-based system that can meet all your training needs. Choose a partner that not only understands your business and training requirements, but that also has a vast understanding of your software system and business rules to ease the creation of content.

Content should be fresh and tailored to each organization's needs; a training partner with depth and breadth of subject matter expertise will be able to deliver a high-quality solution. A company that understands its client's business rules can more easily create relevant content and scenarios with minimal involvement of your internal resources.

When designing a program, recognize that different modes of learning resonate with different people. Having a variety of learning scenarios will ensure that representatives are given vast opportunities to strengthen their skills. "Try me" courses, without post-class assessments, enable users to practice without pressure to master a particular skill or topic. Some modules simply offer information, while others include course completion assessments to identify specific course content representatives need to revisit to gain proficiency in the material.

Web-based training is an excellent alternative and/or complement to face-to-face (classroom) training, which saves the organization both time and money while protecting its technology investment. Users are able to receive training at a pace and time that is convenient to them and the organization is ensured system users are effectively trained in the most cost-effective manner.

The next time your sales force needs a refresher course on software applications or new product training, heed the advice of Aristotle and enable them to learn by doing—right from their own computer.

Gabriella DiGuglielmo is responsible for the management of operations for StayinFront's training department. She has more than five years of experience in software training, including coordinating and managing StayinFront's largest client rollouts. DiGuglielmo also is responsible for all of the custom-designed documentation that is tailored to each of StayinFront's clients, such as User Guides, Quick Reference Cards, and Training Exercises. Prior to joining StayinFront in 2001, she worked in the global marketing group at Schering-Plough Pharmaceuticals.

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