

Reach Out and Train Someone: THE MANY FACES OF DISTANCE LEARNING

It's the best way to put knowledge to use for your employees and your organization.

Studies have shown that people remember 20% of what they see, 40% of what they see and hear, and 70% of what they see, hear, and do. Interactive learning is the best way to retain information, and technology makes it accessible to almost everyone through distance learning.

More and more nonprofit organizations are adopting distance learning to train their employees and volunteers. Offering ongoing education is one of the best ways to keep and motivate good employees. Because distance learning is so learner-friendly, people enjoy it more than traditional forms of education and are more likely to remember what they learn.

What Is It, and Why Does It Work?

Distance learning is any approach to education that replaces the traditional same-time, same-place, face-to-face learning environment. It may combine Web resources, e-mail, faxes, video and audiotape, satellite broadcasts, Internet chat rooms, teleconferencing, streaming video, and Internet work groups.

Distance learning allows employees to take training courses without having to travel to other locations or spend time away from their regular work environment. By providing easy access to high-quality training for all employees, you can increase the knowledge base of your organization.

In a recent talk titled "University in a Box," Michael Cook, professor of continuing studies for the University of Wisconsin,¹ noted, "Inviting large numbers of people to congregate in a room to listen to someone lecture is the second worst way imaginable to try to teach them anything." The worst way? *Requiring* people to congregate to listen to a lecture.

France Belanger and Dianne Jordan, authors of *Evaluation and Implementation of Distance Learning*, note the many advantages of distance learning:

It allows a small number of instructors to teach a large number of learners, thus providing a cost-effective training method.

It lets organizations take advantage of the globalization trend, since people distributed worldwide can take courses from a base location.

It opens up training to those who might otherwise be excluded due to handicaps, obligations such as child care, or geographic location.

It offers interactive tools to facilitate learning. Not only can learners interact with the instructor via phone, fax, and e-mail, but they can interact with each other and access a vast realm of Internet resources.

It provides options for people to learn in their preferred method—whether it's through visual, verbal, auditory, or other means (see "How Many Ways Do You Learn?" on page 26).

If you're unable to provide distance learning in-house, check out distance-learning opportunities offered by other nonprofits (such as the Learning Institute for Nonprofit Organizations, the educational division of the Society for Nonprofit Organizations, www.snpo.org). Or consider starting with just one form of distance learning and adding others later. It doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing undertaking.

What Are the Types of Distance Learning?

As you look at ways to bring distance learning into your organization, it's helpful to consider the advantages and disadvantages of each type. Here's a rundown of the most common types² of distance learning:

1. Computer-Based Training (CBT) is offered on a computer, typically on CD-ROM or disk. You can create such courses with a number of commercially available tools and software packages. Already-prepared courses on CD-ROM are quite cost-effective, although it can be expensive to design a new course on CD-ROM.

Advantages:

- Learners work at their own convenience. They can learn “at their pace and in their place.”
- Interactive multimedia instructions let learners read text, view images or videos, and hear information, as well as practice their knowledge on interactive exercises. Built-in quizzes offer immediate feedback.
- You don’t need an instructor on hand.
- Many employees at the same organization can take a course without all being off work at the same time.
- The cost per learner, for courses taken repeatedly by a large number of learners, is low.

Disadvantages:

- There is no interaction between learners.
- No instructor is available to answer questions.

2. Web-Based Training (WBT) uses the Internet, combining such tools as e-mail, listservs, bulletin boards, and chat facilities. Unlike computer-based training, it gives learners access to instructors and other learners.

Advantages:

- Learners work at their own pace and convenience, from their own home or office.
- You can include learners who would otherwise be unable to attend due to geographic, physical, or scheduling constraints. You can reach out to learners around the globe.
- Because of the dynamic nature of the Internet, learners have access to the most up-to-date material. Since hypertext encourages learners to explore instead of just read material, they are encouraged to participate in their own learning.
- Learners can communicate with each other and their instructor via e-mail, computer conferencing, and chat rooms.
- Most of the tools needed are inexpensive, easy to use, and easy to develop.
- You can easily track learners’ performance and results.

Disadvantages:

- Learners must have access to a computer with a browser, high-resolution monitor, high-speed connection to the Internet, multimedia capabilities, and other minimum hardware and software requirements.

What Helps People Learn?

Here are elements that have been shown to enhance people’s learning, help them retain new material, and assure that they apply what they learn:

- **a clear idea of the learning objectives** of the individual learner and the organization as a whole
- **a chance for learners to review** the learning objectives before starting the course
- **a support system** so that learners can have their questions answered as they go along
- **communication** between learners
- **commitment** to learning by the organization’s top management
- **the opportunity** to see, hear, and interact with the material
- **a chance for learners to give** and receive feedback
- **a variety of learning options** so that they can choose the one that works best for them
- **follow-through** after learning takes place to refresh memory and reinforce concepts
- **an organizational environment** that encourages and rewards learning.

- Learners and instructors face all the problems involved with using the Internet, such as worries about privacy, confidentiality, and viruses obtained by exchanging files.
- Instructors using material from several sources must pay careful attention not to infringe on any copyrights.
- Organizations offering Web-based learning need solid technical support.

3. Teleconferencing requires learners to be connected with each other or the instructor for the duration of the program. There are three forms of teleconferencing:

- **Audioconferencing** uses computer multimedia facilities such as microphones, speakers, and audio software. It may also consist of telephone conference calls as a supplement to videoconferencing.

How Many Ways Do You Learn?

People learn in at least eight different ways. To pinpoint your preferred ways of learning, check the statements that are true for you.

Verbal/Linguistic Learner

- I like to read and do it often.
- I need to either read instructions or listen and read to learn something new.
- I like learning and using new words.
- I enjoy writing.
- I keep a journal or diary.
- I like learning new languages.
- I enjoy puns, metaphors, and plays on words.
- I like to tell people what I have read or heard.
- Total**

Logical/Math Learner

- I can do math in my head.
- I enjoy math and science.
- I like doing brain-teaser puzzles.
- I attack most problem-solving activities analytically and logically.
- I like to read about scientific discoveries.
- I enjoy playing games like chess.
- I like to go to science museums and exhibits.
- I like doing scientific experiments.
- I spend many hours at the computer.
- Total**

Visual/Spatial Learner

- I like to look at color and design.
- I enjoy jigsaw puzzles and mazes.
- I like drawing and painting.
- I get pictures in my head when I'm reading or thinking.
- I would rather look at a book with pictures, photos, or graphics than read a book without them.
- I am good at reading and interpreting maps.
- I like to go to art galleries and museums.
- I usually remember a person's face but forget their name.
- I can find my way around new places.
- Total**

Body/Kinesthetic Learner

- I am involved in at least one sport.
- I can't sit still for long periods of time.
- I would rather observe a demonstration than read about how to do something.
- I like working with my hands.
- I learn best by touching and doing things.
- I can juggle or would like to learn to.
- I spend a lot of time doing physical activities.
- To learn something new, I have to practice it rather than read about it.
- I like to dance and act.
- Total**

Auditory/Acoustic Learner

- I listen to music regularly.
- I remember things better when I hear them spoken than when I see or read them.
- I can keep time to music I hear.
- I know many songs.
- I enjoy lots of different music.
- I like to listen to stories that are read aloud.
- I can remember almost anything if it is sung, tapped out, or whistled.
- I like to have music playing when I work or read.
- Total**

People/Interpersonal Learner

- I have many close friends.
- I am comfortable meeting new people.
- I like taking charge. People say I am a leader.
- I learn cooperatively with others.
- I like to work with people.
- I make friends easily and find it easy to talk with people in public places.
- I am an excellent listener.
- I would rather spend time with friends than be alone.
- Total**

Self/Intrapersonal Learner

- I like learning more about myself.
- I like spending time alone and do it often.
- I keep a journal and record my thoughts and dreams.
- I enjoy working alone and find it hard to work in a group.
- I set personal goals for myself.
- I feel uncomfortable when I have been around people too long.
- I know my strengths and weaknesses.
- I like spending quiet time in a room working or just thinking.
- When working in a group, I spend more time thinking than speaking.
- Total**

Naturalist

- I enjoy observing plants and animals in their natural habitat.
- I am interested in preserving, protecting, and managing our natural resources.
- I enjoy visiting and exploring new places.
- I can recognize the different sounds and signs in nature.
- I like working with plants.
- I enjoy collecting things from nature.
- I participate in outdoor activities, such as canoeing, hiking, camping, fishing, and boating.
- I like learning how weather and climate affect plants, animals, and people.
- I enjoy having a pet or would like to have one.
- Total**

—Adapted from Mindware, Inc., Minneapolis, Minnesota

- **Videoconferencing** uses cameras, multimedia monitors, and software to actually view remote individuals in a simulated face-to-face environment.

- **Dataconferencing** is the simultaneous exchange of data between several individuals. This includes sharing documents to work on, automating file transfers to several individuals, and using chat facilities and whiteboards. When visual graphic and text data are complemented with audio capabilities, courses are said to use audiographic conferencing technologies.

Teleconferencing is appropriate for small groups that use a number of remote settings, allowing learners to travel to the satellite site.

Advantages:

- Learners can interact with each other as well as their instructor and gain immediate feedback. Videoconferencing provides the most true-to-life option of all and is the best method for visual learners.
- The instructor can use a combination of audio, text, graphics, and video.
- Learners can be geographically distributed worldwide.

Disadvantages:

- The cost of setting up teleconferencing facilities can be substantial, and support personnel are necessary.
- Learners must be present at the prescribed time and remain for the entire session.

4. Videotaping is one of the oldest forms of distance learning and still a good alternative for organizations that wish to present a specific topic of an enduring nature.

Advantages:

- The delivery mechanism is simple. Videotapes can be played back on any videotape player.
- Learners can view the tape at home or at the office, at any time, whenever is most convenient for them.
- Videotapes can be easily distributed worldwide.
- Videotapes require no instructors to be present when the learner takes the course.
- Cost savings can be substantial.

Disadvantages:

- Learners aren't active in the learning process.
- Learners receive no immediate feedback.
- There is no interaction between learners, and no instructor is available.
- The material can't be updated except by creating a new video.

Is Distance Learning for You?

Before people sign up as distance learners, ask them to follow these suggestions to assure that distance learning is a good option for them:

- **Decide if distance learning fits your personality.** The best distance learners are self-motivated and goal-oriented.

- **Do your homework.** Ask about the following key issues before you sign on to a distance-education program:

- **Attrition:** Find out how many students have dropped out and how many have completed their courses.

- **Interaction:** Ask how much interaction is available with instructors and other students.

- **Time spent on course work:** Many distance courses require more time on course work than traditional classes.

- **Determine if you're comfortable with written communication.** Much of distance learning is done in writing.

- **Talk to other distance learners.** Find out what they think are the pros and cons of distance learning. Talk to them about your concerns and how you may be able to deal with them.

—adapted from Monster.com

5. Video Tele-Training (VTT) combines the advantages of teleconferencing and videotaping. It uses live video and audio capabilities to offer training at several locations. The instructor teaches a course in real-time that is broadcasted to remote locations. Learners can participate by asking questions via phone or fax. Facilitators are available at the remote locations.

Advantages:

- Learners can interact among themselves.
- Learners can interact with their instructor verbally (and face-to-face when cameras are also installed at remote sites) and get answers to their questions right away.
- Many large groups in remote locations can be taught at the same time.
- Since courses are given “live,” instructors can modify the material as needed.

Disadvantages:

- Learners must be present when the course is given.
- Set-up costs can be substantial.
- Highly trained technical personnel must be available for each course.
- The facilitators at each site must be trained.

What's the Best Option?

The ideal technology is a combination of as many types of distance learning as possible. Since people learn in different ways, they will retain more information if they have a variety of learning options, according to Katie Burnham, president of the Learning Institute for Nonprofit Organizations. A pioneer in providing distance education for nonprofit organization, the Learning Institute³ uses a mixture of methods to offer the first-ever certificate in nonprofit management. Its courses cover the core competencies needed to lead a nonprofit organization, including strategic planning, resource development, financial management, board governance, marketing, strategic alliances, and social entrepreneurship. Nonprofit learners can sign up for selected courses or the entire program.

“We give people the option to get our live programs on the Web or on their telephones via audioconferencing,” says Burnham. “Then we take these materials and make them into videotapes, audiotapes, DVD, and CD-ROM. We

also offer a variety of learning resources on our Web site, including *Nonprofit World* articles and answers to frequently asked questions.

“The goal is to provide total learning packages that will create the highest-quality educational experience. We want learners to continue using the materials after the program is over.”

“People are stubborn in their choice of their favorite way to learn,” says Amy Payne of the Learning Institute. “When they sign up for courses, they’re very clear about why they prefer the option they choose. Each person learns differently and thinks their way is the best way!”

Each type of distance learning has associated benefits, costs, and limitations, as Belanger and Jordan make clear. There are, they say, compelling reasons why many organizations are moving toward a combination of Web-based and computer-based training. The two technologies complement each other’s strengths and minimize each other’s weaknesses. Used together, they offer many advantages for the learner and the organization.

How Can You Assure Success?

Before you start a distance-learning program, use the following checklist to ensure not only that people learn but that they use their new knowledge to create tangible change in your organization:

Why Do Nonprofit Execs Return to School? Not for More Money

A recent study suggests that nonprofit professionals are furthering their education for reasons other than salary increases. The research contradicts prevailing theories that point to economic gain as a primary factor in continuing education.

Survey respondents—256 nonprofit management students in certificate and master’s programs—rated personal development and skill acquisition as the most important factors shaping their return to school. Following closely was the desire for new employment opportunities.

Most survey respondents were employed in the nonprofit sector, and most indicated that employers’ suggestions had little impact on their decision to continue their education. Once they were enrolled, though, their employers were at least somewhat supportive.

Respondents were essentially “place-bound,” with most (71%) seeking a program within a one-hour’s drive. Although distance-learning programs are an alternative to students who don’t want to travel far for their education, only 13% of students had considered such programs. For more information, see www.CenterPointInstitute.org/Bridges/papers.htm.

Only 13% of students had considered distance-learning programs.

• **Be clear about your learning objectives** as an organization. Match those objectives to the most appropriate distance-learning method. For example, is your main objective to teach a specific fundraising skill, to provide a broad background in fundraising, or to give people practice in asking for money? Does this objective require interaction among learners? Does it require an instructor to be present?

• **Decide who** in the organization should be trained and what your expectations are for that training.

• **Identify learners' objectives.** Make sure they fit with your organization's objectives and the delivery methods you have in mind. For example, some organizations made an early commitment to delivery via video tele-training. With recent technological advances, Web-based delivery may provide features unavailable with video tele-training. Learners accustomed to the Web may not be satisfied to receive training passively via video tele-training.

• **Explain the distance-learning method** and the organization's objectives to learners beforehand so they know what to expect and how to get the most from the material.

• **Use as many different types** of learning as possible to give people a chance to see, hear, and interact with the material.

• **Assess the technology infrastructure** available for delivering the material.

• **Decide what organizational factors might serve as barriers** to new learning methods and how you can reduce those barriers.

• **Evaluate the resources you have available for training.** Be sure training is part of your budget. Don't let it be a casualty if your budget is cut; training is too important to the future of your organization.

• **Develop a support system for learners.** For example, will they have a 24-hour help line if they have problems with their cybercourses?

• **Be sure learners understand** the new imperatives required by distance learning. Learners accustomed to traditional education at a set time and place that's quiet and conducive to learning—what's known as “right-time, right-place” environments—may have trouble making a transition to an “anytime, anywhere” environment. With distance learning, it is usually the learner's responsibility to find a time and place conducive to learning. See “Is Distance Learning for You?” on page 27.

• **Include instructors as active participants early in the project.** It's important that instructors understand the constraints of distance learning. Projecting a supportive persona in the distance-learning environment takes practice.

• **Decide how you will provide feedback** from learners.

• **Plan ways to support** ongoing education within your organization.

• **Train people in teams** so they can work together to practice what they learn. Team members are more likely to activate ideas than one person alone.⁴

• **Create systems to evaluate progress** toward your organization's learning goals.

• **Foster an environment** in which people are constantly learning and improving their performance to reach your organization's goals.

• **Lead the way** by being a continual learner yourself, inspiring others in your organization to do the same.

• **Make sure everyone in your organization** has time to learn and is rewarded for learning.

• **Share your vision** of your organization as a place to learn.

• **Create a learning plan** and continually update it as new technologies and resources become available.

• **Give learners avenues** to put their new ideas to work to solve problems. ■

Footnotes

¹Contact Michael Cook at mcook@dcs.wisc.edu.

²France Belanger & Dianne Jordan, *Evaluation & Implementation of Distance Learning*, Idea Group Publishing, www.idea-group.com.

³Contact the Learning Institute at www.snpo.org; click on the LI logo or button.

⁴For more on team training, see Gooding and Muehrcke in “Selected References.”

Selected References

Gooding, Cheryl, “Using Training Strategically to Build Organizational Capacity,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 14, No. 4.

Learning Institute for Nonprofit Organizations' Videotape Catalog.

Muehrcke, Jill, “Nonprofit Education Is Coming to Your Town,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 15, No. 2.

Muehrcke, Jill, “Back to School,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 16, No. 4.

Nathan, Maria L., “The Nonprofit Executive as Chief Learning Officer,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 16, No. 2.

These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, 800-424-7367, www.snpo.org.