

George Anders' article, "Companies Find Online Training Has Its Limits," in the March 26<sup>th</sup> issue of the Wall Street Journal, makes a very valid point—one that instructional designers have known for some time. No media is a panacea to corporate America's training needs. Every time a new delivery media comes along, people jump on the bandwagon without asking the hard but necessary, questions about the appropriateness of the media to the training needs. We've seen this with movies, CBT, video, and now e-Learning delivered via the Internet, Intranet, or CD-ROM.

Yet Mr. Anders' article stopped short of really examining the reasons for the limits he cites. Since we know little about the specific training courses for the companies he references, we are left to ask some questions. This letter asks those questions and suggests some other reasons why training may succeed or fail.

First we need to ask what real performance needs were the companies trying to solve, and did anyone consider whether the performance issue could, in fact, be solved by training. In addition to training, performance technologists consider other solutions, such as incentives, motivation, equipment, environment, standards, accountability, and a host of other possible solutions to a problem before deciding to develop training. Training is only a solution to a performance issue where the lack of skills and knowledge is a primary cause. Yet managers and directors all too often bypass this critical performance analysis, ordering their staffs to develop training.

Other questions to ask are about the skill set and methodology of those creating the training. Are they skilled and seasoned instructional designers who follow a standard methodology to develop courses? Or has management asked someone less qualified, but cheaper, to write a course? Worse yet, has management asked writers to put a user's guide, reference manual, or slide presentation online and called it training?

The real goal of training is to create relevant job-based training that teaches learners the tasks, skills, and knowledge they need in order to do their jobs. Transfer of this learning to the job ("job transfer") is, therefore, paramount. However, if no one has conducted a thorough audience, job, and task analysis to determine what to train and the desired outcomes of training, the course is headed for failure from the beginning. The ability to do this analysis and turn the findings into meaningful training is one of the primary skills of a seasoned instructional designer. Furthermore, the ability to teach the job tasks in a relevant, engaging way that also keeps learners accountable for their learning by providing meaningful interactions and questions in online courses is both a skill and an art.

Whether the delivery media is classroom or some electronic form, part of a good audience and task analysis is to determine the appropriate delivery method for the audience's experience and needs as well as the tasks to be trained.

Mr. Anders cites Home Depot's training of cashiers as a success. Software training is often a good candidate for online training. Some of the courses and skills that were cited as failures, such as sales and customer service, are not appropriate for online learning, so those results should be no surprise. Learners can't learn to sell unless they practice selling in the way they will on the job – either in person or on the phone, for example. The fault in those courses, therefore, lies not in the delivery media but in the expectation that using an online method will result in skills that transfer to the job.

One of the most important aspects of any training course is the methods used. A teacher can demonstrate a software procedure in the classroom, and a designer can create an equally effective simulated demonstration for online training. The learner can practice at a computer in the classroom or via a simulated practice online. Both situations will result in learning regardless of the delivery mechanism, as long as the methods are appropriate to the tasks, skills, and audience.

On the other hand, a role play, which is an effective way to teach sales or customer service, is difficult to simulate online and obtain the same level of job transfer that would occur if that method were used in the classroom. So, the real answer to whether to use an online delivery method is “it depends – on the training needs, the audience, and the methods.”

In my world as a Certified Performance Technologist and an award-winning instructional designer with over 25 years of experience, I am seeing a growing awareness of the need for blended learning. Online training may do well as pre-work for classroom training, or it may be part of the practices in classroom training. Or, it could come after an introductory classroom training piece. Regardless of how we deliver training, we must abandon the idea of a “one size fits all” solution every time we discover a new medium. It’s just not that simple. And when we create courses we must use the tried and true methods and skills of the performance technologist and the instructional designer to increase the likelihood of job transfer and training success.

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