WEB-BASED TRAINING (WBT) -- the use of the World Wide Web for training purposes that can be delivered anytime, anywhere to anyone with access to an Internet-enabled computer -- has become a term both loaded with possibilities and mired down in misconceptions. As with face-to-face training, the goal of WBT is to improve skills, enhance learning and understanding, and change attitudes and behaviors over time. When thinking about the best ways to deliver training, WBT offers the ability to deliver training in three distinct ways: synchronously (in real time), asynchronously (not in real time) or by using a combination of the two. In addition, numerous technologies and combinations of technologies can be used to deliver exciting WBT. However, when planning for WBT, administrators should carefully consider how it can best serve the training needs of their organization by examining its various benefits and limitations.

Benefits of WBT

Educators exploring WBT as an option to meet a school's or district's training needs may find that it provides several advantages over traditional face-to-face training. In fact, several research studies illustrate that WBT is equally as effective in terms of participant grades and scores. Although, in some cases, participants prefer WBT over traditional classroom training. The major benefits of WBT are listed below (Hall 2000; Horton 2000; Gold 1997; and Ligle and Madey 1997).

Flexibility and time

• Training may occur anytime, anyplace that there is Internet access.

• Individuals can learn at their own pace and around their own schedules within a given training time frame.

• Individuals gain access to colleagues and experts from geographic locations with whom they would ordinarily not have the opportunity to communicate.

• Individuals are able to take advantage of lifelong learning without relocating or quitting their jobs.

Learning and understanding

• Individuals must think, respond, problem solve, use critical reasoning, interact and be creative to fully participate in WBT.

• Individuals may feel more in control of their own learning, thus possibly taking on more responsibility.

• Individuals gain access to real-world examples, databases, experts and additional sources of information online.

• Individuals are able to reflect in greater depth on responses to questions or activities posed in training before making their answers and opinions public to other participants.

• WBT emphasizes a learner-centered approach to training versus simply logging the number of hours spent in training.

Cross-platform and varied software
• Individuals may be positively challenged by actively navigating the online environment and learning new technologies.

• **Training** may be accessed on several computer platforms, including Windows, Macintosh and UNIX.

• **Training** may be accessed using many of the common Web browsers, including Netscape Navigator, Internet Explorer, America Online, Lynx and other free proprietary software.

Cost

• Overall **training** costs are often cheaper for participants due to eliminating travel and facilities fees.

• WBT is less expensive when considering the districtwide and worldwide distribution of **training**, in relation to the limited number of participants in a traditional classroom environment.

• WBT can be easily updated and "recycled" for additional **training** at a nominal fee.

Accessibility and equal opportunity for all

• The standardized nature of WBT equalizes delivery of the materials for all individuals.

• Opportunities to attend **training** are created for individuals with disabilities and others who may be excluded due to time, geography or mobility.

• Multimedia such as graphics, video and audio can enhance learning and understanding, as well as be adapted to individuals with various learning styles.

• Individual characteristics such as physical disabilities remain anonymous to other participants, thus eliminating judgments and stigmas often associated with particular disabilities.

Constraints of WBT

While WBT provides several benefits over traditional face-to-face **training**, there are a number of disadvantages associated with this form of **training**. Below are factors one should be aware of when considering WBT for their students or staff (Hall 2000; Horton 2000; Gold 1997; and Lingle and Madey 1997).

Flexibility and time

• WBT often requires more effort and time on the part of instructors and designers in developing and adapting curricula to the Web-based medium. This type of **training** also frequently requires a shift in teaching and **training** strategies.

• Participants must spend additional time familiarizing themselves with the new technologies before they can engage in the content; some never get past this initial stage.

• Instructors often need to provide additional assistance to students who are new to the technology and medium.

• Participants often spend more time in online discussions, brainstorming, writing and doing problem-solving activities than they do in face-to-face classrooms.

• Time lapses (when engaged in asynchronous discussion), while waiting for responses from instructors or colleagues, may be frustrating to the WBT participants.

Learning and understanding

• Materials must be engaging, self-describing and easy to use in order to avoid confusion on the part of students, because the instructor is not always present to answer questions right away.
• Some individuals feel isolated and lonely learning in this medium due to the lack of a shared physical space with other trainees and the instructor.

• Meanings can often be misconstrued without face-to-face and real-time cues.

• Some individuals remain skeptical about learning in a new way; instead they prefer learning in the traditional format.

• Individuals may find it hard to concentrate or stay on task by not being in a structured classroom setting.

• Some individuals may find the hypermedia environment confusing or difficult to follow.

Cross-platform and varied software

• Individuals may feel threatened or intimidated by the new technologies involved.

• Expertise with technology is now almost as important as knowledge in the core subject area.

• Bandwidth limitations that involve intensive graphics, video and audio often slow down WBT.

• It is difficult to ensure exact design and formatting across platforms and numerous browsers.

• Online training is often not viable for everyone, such as those with limited or no access to the Internet or technology.

• Some instructors are resistant to learning new technologies that they believe will soon become obsolete.

Cost

• Expenses are often hard to estimate when designing WBT for the first time, and a break-even point for return on investment can be even harder to determine.

• Cost can be more expensive than in a traditional classroom environment given the need for special equipment, software, instructional designers and the adaptation of course material, especially when designing WBT for the first time.

• WBT may require an extra staff person to handle technical issues for participants and training developers.

Accessibility and equal opportunity for all

• The ability and necessity to access the training materials are as important as understanding the materials.

• Individuals with disabilities are at risk of being excluded when content is not made fully accessible.

Conclusion

WBT presents both opportunities and obstacles for individuals exploring WBT as an option to meet a school's or district's training needs. Clearly, a lot of thought must go into the initial planning stage, taking into account the specific needs of the particular school or district. However, in the end, it should be remembered that “what makes any course good or poor is a consequence of how well it is designed, delivered and conducted, not whether the students are face-to-face or at a distance” (Moore and Kearsly 1996).

References


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