

MANAGING

TRAIN STAFF VIRTUALLY ANYWHERE

BY DOUGLAS W. FOGWELL

Web-based training lets employees train whenever and wherever they want, plus the interactivity improves retention, making training more effective.

In 2003, managers at Initial Security got a call from a major pharmaceutical client. The client had just started a new e-learning program that it was praising. Initial Security—a contract security firm (now part of AlliedBarton Security Services)—had always sought customer input. In this case, the meeting changed the way the company trained its officers.

While training at Initial Security was up to date and effective, it relied on traditional methods including classroom training, CD-ROMs, and videotapes. As a result of the visit to the client site, managers decided to devise an entirely new program focused on Web-based training and testing.

The investment in online training would be substantial, but managers knew that improved training could reap higher returns in officer safety and client satisfaction. And well-trained employees increase efficiency and reduce liability. A companywide Web-based training program could help the company satisfy clients' wishes for consistent services across geographic areas and at all levels of staff.

The interactive Web-based training would use approaches known to boost retention rates dramatically. For example, a study conducted by the National Institute for Applied Behavioral Sciences found that, on average, students retained just 5 percent of what they heard in lectures, 10 percent of what they read, and 20 percent of what they saw and heard in audiovisual presentations.

When students practiced by doing, however, the retention rates shot up to 75 percent. When students either taught others the task or immediately performed it, retention rates rose to 80 percent. Initial Security decided to incorporate these two methods in its training program.

Managers sought out a consultant to help the company develop the program. They turned to e-learning consultant Etico Solutions, Inc.

DEVELOPMENT

Initial Security reviewed all of its training materials for content and relevance. The core training material was then given to Etico to be converted to an interactive online format. The system is based on open-source software and is referred to as the Initial Online Academy.

CONTENT

The basic induction courses focus on report writing, fire protection, investigations, patrols and fixed posts, communications, emergency situations, physical security, crime prevention, public relations, civil and criminal law, and ethics. All new employees must complete the induction courses prior to being assigned to a client site.

Advanced, supervisory, and continuing education courses are also offered for those seeking more information or promotion within the company.

PRESENTATION

Quality educational material, according to Etico, needs to have several key elements to be effective. First, it must be engaging, enlightening, and enjoyable because managers will not be standing over the student during the training sessions.

A second element in presentation is that the content must present relevant information in a realistic way. Students must feel that they are gaining practical skills.

Initial Online Academy includes real-life examples that officers could experience during their duties. For example, in one interactive exercise in the Initial Online Academy course on report writing, security officers watch a video, then answer questions about the description of a person involved in a theft from a loading dock. The exercise demonstrates the amount of detail needed to provide a thorough report.

In a vehicle description exercise, the students are given 3-D pictures of six vehicles. Using a mouse, students can rotate the vehicles on the screen to see all sides. Once the exercise starts, they are given a vague description of a vehicle that matches one of the six. They must determine whether they can rule out all other vehicles and positively identify one based on the description or whether they need more information.

Each time they request more information, the description gets more precise until, eventually, one car will stand out. To make the exercise more engaging, a timer starts when the scenario begins.

The simulations attempt to replicate the way incidents occur in an actual situation. Officers rarely have unlimited time to collect identifying marks on a suspect vehicle. Whether the students realize it or not, they are learning a valuable lesson about the need for clear, descriptive explanations of vehicles in their reports.

TIME

Incorporating all of these elements into a training program is not easy. Initial Security spent more than two years working with Etico on Initial Online Academy.

There is also a greater time investment demanded of trainees. Management knew that students would find it more labor-intensive than video training. The Web-based system requires that they read the content and complete the interactive activities. However, managers were also banking on the fact that this extra effort would improve retention and increase student comprehension of the content.

TESTING

To judge the effectiveness of the training, students take a test before starting a course and another after it. The questions on the two tests are the same but randomized. In addition to showing how much learning took place, the tests identify topics on which students might need further training, as well as any aspects of the training modules that might need modification. The system is updated frequently to reflect new regulatory information and to add new courses.

COST

During the rollout of Initial Online Academy, the company learned that expenses associated with e-learning programs differ from those of more traditional training programs. Web-based training requires computer hardware, hosting services, and technological support.

Courses can be obtained on either a pay-per-student basis or a one-time fee per module. The cost of Web-based training is typically up front with the return on investment spread out over several years and hundreds of employees.

ADVANTAGES

Conventional training programs often require security officers to be force-fed as much information as possible during a scheduled training day, with the hope that they will recall what they have learned, when needed.

By contrast, Web-based training programs are available around the clock and from any location with a computer and Internet connection.

In addition to allowing employees to self-train from anywhere, the asynchronous nature of Web-based training lends itself to interruptions. Officers can train during hours of slow activity at their posts when they are receptive and alert. These programs also allow officers to review the material as frequently as necessary.

Thus, through e-learning, officers can learn in digestible portions and immediately apply what they have learned. The system logs all user activity and where the user is working from. Managers use the electronic audit trail produced by the system to measure the progress of their team.

Another advantage of Web-based training is that it removes the peer pressure of the classroom environment. In a classroom setting, students are continually judging their work against that of their peers. With Web-based training, officers are competing against themselves.

OVERSIGHT

As with any training, the classroom content needs to be blended with on-the-job examples. Another positive feature of the training is that it provides students and supervisors with the same examples linked to the same content. Therefore, if supervisors are familiar with the Web-based content, they have a consistent springboard from which to guide employees on the job.

Initial Security found that Web-based training doesn't obviate a supervisor's duty to manage employees. But the medium offers an easy way, through the audit trails, to monitor participation and progress. Managers gauge how their officers are doing and offer counsel and extra off-line assistance as needed.

RESULTS

The early response to Initial Online Academy, which rolled out nine months ago, has been positive both in terms of employee attitudes and results.

A San Antonio-based officer reports his preference for online training because "it is a great help in getting and reviewing the correct answers immediately upon completion of the test." An Initial Security manager says that he prefers online training because he can fit it in around his workload at his own pace.

Testing also indicates progress. Officers scored on average 22 points higher after training than before. Supervisors' test scores rose 12 points after training. The smaller differential may be because supervisors know more to start with.

A primary challenge for security firms and the companies that hire them is ensuring that all of their security officers are up to speed on the array of information they need to know. A well-designed e-learning program can help to ensure that all personnel are properly and uniformly trained.

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