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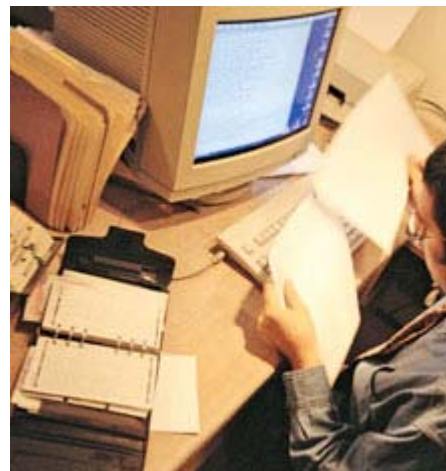


Training Your Technicians Online

Getting buy-in from guys who would rather be in the field

By Lewis Bell

We often find that culture shifts or technology changes make us feel uncomfortable for a while, until that change becomes the norm and attitudes adjust. For years, we have trained technicians using the tried-and-true methodology of an experienced "uber technician" imparting wisdom to rookie technicians using classroom presentations and hands-on exercises with equipment. Unfortunately, we have built a culture that insists that this previously successful methodology remains the only way to train a technician. Now that online training has evolved into a robust and available resource, many manufacturers are converting large portions of their training to online or blended training, and the attitude of service managers and technicians needs to shift in order to take advantage of the benefits of this new-ish technology.



Service managers spend a great deal of money on training. One estimate is that it costs \$20,000 one new technician in every product offered by just one retail fueling manufacturer. Most of this cost is tuition, but the associated travel costs and lost productivity for instructor-led events. Online training (but probably not eliminate) those travel expenses and time out of the field. Manufacturers want training that is less expensive so service companies will enroll more technicians and increase the skills of the technicians.

Online training offers the added benefit of repeatability as well. How many times have you taken a course only to forget a key piece of information later on when it was really needed? By having a course that can be re-accessed as many times as necessary, the online course becomes a valuable library for more difficult service calls. Manufacturers can also roll out updates and changes into the previously deployed online module so that the time between the change and the time the technicians are available to be trained has been considerably reduced.



5 Online Training Benefits

- Repeatability
- Compliance Tracking
- Real-Time Record Keeping
- No Travel Expenses
- Reduced Downtime

By its very nature, online training is easily tracked for compliance as well. For many products, providing proof of compliance is essential to avoid fines and work stoppages. Many manufacturers in compliance-heavy regions offer regulators online access for compliance certification. Since the data is updated in real time, the regulators can see the data on technicians rather than

chase them down to see easily forged certification cards. Older methodologies could not provide record keeping; often technicians had to wait months to have their certificate delivered by mail. Current management systems offer the technician the ability to print out a certificate for his records the moment training has been completed. The service manager is also able to log into the system to see the

the technicians working for his company.

How can you take advantage of online learning when your technicians would rather be in the field? How do you change your office learning culture to comply with the inevitability of online training? Follow your own lead, and you will be well on your way to being able to take advantage of online manufacturer training.

Barrier #1: Inadequate PC Hardware in a Noisy Environment

Often, our training registrar receives calls from technicians who cannot seem to get into our online training page. After a few minutes, she discovers that the technician is using an antiquated computer or is accessing the system via a dial-up connection. It is no wonder that technicians hate online training when they are expected to learn on a PC with a 14-inch VGA monitor located in a corner of the warehouse.

Service companies should invest in a learning station for their employees. With minimal investment in office real estate, you can set aside a quiet area for online learning. A PC capable of delivering most complex multimedia courses can cost as little as \$500-\$600, complete with speakers and a monitor. If that same company adds just a few dollars per technician, they can provide them with a set of headphones, further separating the "learning world" from the "work-ing world."

Connectivity is often the biggest problem encountered by students. Make sure that your IT department meets the requirements published by the learning vendor (firewalls, pop-up blockers, etc.) and that they have thoroughly tested the connection *before* the students log in. Remember that online learning is not a change for the technician—too often they get frustrated with online courses because the buttons they click do not change and they give up.

One additional note on hardware: Do not use a wireless connection for broadband-based online learning. DSL often has "drop-outs" which can reset an exam halfway through. Nothing beats a wired connection, a cable modem or T1 connection for reliability. If you use DSL, make sure it's not the "economy package" shared by all users in the office. Invest a bit more in your connectivity and you will see the benefits.

If you have a dedicated learning station, it is easy to set up a document library on that PC to be accessible to the technicians at your company. When someone accesses a course, he or she can download the course materials to a storage device, replacing the older versions. Your technicians can then transport the materials needed to their service laptops. Too many good technicians have been "stuck" on a service call because of an outdated manual in their service vehicle.

Barrier #2: Inadequate Time Set Aside to Learn

There is a prevalent myth that online learning equals "no time" learning—that because a course is self-paced, it takes no time investment on the part of the student. Maybe some people have the erroneous idea that you can just plug in a student (like in the movie *The Matrix*) and just download the information directly into his or her brain in a few seconds. Outside Hollywood, this technology just doesn't exist. Learning takes time.

Service managers often see online learning as after-hours work to be done on the technician's own time. Would this happen with an instructor-led course? Probably not. Time would be set aside for the technician to be out of the field with his cell phone off, sitting in a classroom. The same allocation should be given for online learning. Most manufacturers supply a time estimate with an online course and the technician should be given at least this amount of time away from the responsibilities of the job. It is sometimes asserted that online learning is not as effective as instructor-led classes. Online learning can be even more effective if properly implemented. Don't fall into the trap of, "Well, John is in the office taking a course, but I can probably interrupt him on this one service call." By doing this, you destroy the learning environment that you need to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and retention of that knowledge. You probably wouldn't pull him out of an instructor's classroom, so don't pull him out of an online classroom.


In one of our more complex courses, we ask the students a question regarding their learning experience: "How much time were you given to complete the online portion of this course prior to class?" The average answer is a couple of hours. Our recommendation: 20 hours. The problem we experience is that the online course is often a stand-alone course, but a component of a larger, blended course. The students must have the knowledge conveyed in the online portion *before* attending the hands-on course with an instructor. I'm sure you are unique in facing this challenge as more manufacturers see the benefit of blended courses. Simply schedule time for your student to complete prerequisite online training or you will feel the pain of inadequately trained service technician—fully certified, but completely useless.

Barrier #3: Inadequate Learning Culture

For many service companies, manufacturer training is often nothing more than a diploma mill. “V X or Y certification in order to install or service this equipment, so I need to get my guys trained.” statement, the end goal is simply *permission* to do the work, not *proficiency* to do the work. Succ companies see training as a valuable asset outside of certification.

It’s interesting to me to see the difference behind the scenes. For instance, we have one online c optional modules are offered within the course. They are not necessary for certification, but they students who want more information. Very few students take advantage as a whole, but students companies *always* access this optional information. I would venture a guess that these companie hunger for service knowledge into their technicians. Online courses give us the ability to deliver t modules for those service companies who have built this culture of learning into their technicians

Online training is not going away. In a recent poll of training managers, Bersin and Associates found that smaller companies are offering more and more online training (14 percent of all learning in 2006 increasing to 20 percent in 2007), demonstrating, according to *Training* magazine, “that more small companies are acquiring the skills and technology to make online training a reality.” (2007 Industry Report, November/December 2007)



Are They Learni
In Part 2, Lewis Bell expl
determine if your online t
effective. Read [“How To
Effective Online Training](#)

The culture is changing and those service companies who desire to keep their technicians apprised newest technology and the most accurate training will embrace online learning. Coupled with ha classroom experience, it is the least expensive and most effective way to train technicians. Simp modifications to the way we think about Web-based training and the way we expect technicians t yield ongoing benefits for service companies and manufacturers.



Meet The Author

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