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GTE's Training Goes

High-tech



After a major downsizing and merger, GTE's HR expects 50 percent of its training programs to be technology-based.

By Karen Rayl

Technology. Connectivity. Internet. Intranet. Doing more with less. Seizing on these buzzwords for the new millennium, downsized corporate training departments are meeting training needs with new technology and fewer people. Like many corporate giants, GTE Telephone Operations, a Dallas-based subsidiary of the nation's largest local access telephone company, has reorganized and downsized to meet competitive needs, a move that has included shrinking HR's education and training department by two-thirds over the past several years from 600 trainers to 237.

Edward F. Lander, assistant vice president of GTE's education and training division of HR, recognized huge opportunities as well as a real necessity to meld training and technology. "We had to find ways of doing things differently and more cheaply," Lander

explains. "All HR departments (staffing compensation and others) were downsized to reduce expenses. The same goal applied to the education and training division. We expected it to reduce costs and increase productivity value as well. And we knew from adult learning theory that trainees don't really want the 'schoolmarm' teaching them anymore. They learn better by being addressed in their learning styles and experiencing the learning activity."

In the past, GTE had used some computer-based training and paper-based training in self-paced programs. However, the majority of training still was delivered in the traditional lecture method. The decision to make HR less expensive and of more value necessitated out-of-the-box, breakthrough thinking in concepts and actions.

Therefore, Lander, having foreseen the need to use more technology and fewer instructors, initiated the "80/20 Rule" in 1989, directing his curriculum



If your company is facing a downsizing or merger, HR doesn't have to abandon employee training. At Dallas-based GTE Telephone operations, 50 percent of new training being developed will use a technology-based approach.

developer group (the staff that creates, writes and buys courses) that 20 percent of newly developed courses had to use alternative-delivery technologies, such as distance learning, interactive or linear video, computer-assisted programs and workbooks. As a result, GTE's education and training met its goal, with 22 percent of new training being technology-based that year.

In 1991 GTE's merger with Contel, another large telecommunications company (formerly based in Atlanta), prompted the necessity for many employees to learn new processes. "The training volume was so great, we just couldn't have done it without alternative means," Lander says. "And, it basically went off without a hitch."

Again in 1993, HR's education and training division faced a training challenge during a huge company reengineering effort in which the company changed eight of its major processes, such as billing, repair and customer contact.

"This was probably one of the biggest reengineering efforts ever undertaken for any U.S. company," Lander said. "Yet again, due to our alternative-learning techniques, the training was successful and was carried out without even causing a blip on the radar screen."

Lander since has kept lowering the curriculum development limbo bar for instructor-led training and currently has the "50/50 Rule" for a ratio of at least 50 percent of new training being developed to use a technology-based training approach.

Achieving "Mission Impossible."

In early 1996, the education and training division took on a challenge that again would test its technological capabilities. HR set out to provide training to more than 25,000 employees on the company's new mainframe computer order-entry/activation system by mid-1997. Just like the "Mission Impossible" force, the department's personnel accepted the

mission that gave them the opportunity to use the creative high-tech solutions they already were testing.

The new national order collection vehicle (NOCV) order-entry system that replaced multiple order-entry, previously in place across the nation, presented an immense challenge for the education and training unit. Employees requiring training would include everyone who entered a business or residence, or acted upon a long-distance connection order/request for service. It also would include everyone who touched or was affected by an order for service (installers, maintenance technicians and engineers).

First, GTE formed an implementation team, composed of a cross section of managers within the company. NOCV coordinators (part of the implementation team) were assigned to each work group (installers, engineers, repair personnel) to collaborate as necessary and to ensure information flow. The education and training staff then determined a need to update its department infrastructure (hardware, software and communication links) and wrote a successful business case for updating 24 of its training classrooms across the United States to state-of-the-art computer equipment, so employees would be learning on the same equipment they'd be using on the job.

After updating its computers, the education and training unit went to work on achieving its mission. It used an internally developed system called *BASELINE*, an online database of existing course content information that can be searched via keyword, phrase or course number. After locating the appropriate information, the developer selects the desired material and copies it into another document. Additional content is then written to meet the specific training need of the new course. When completed, the system paginates the customized program and updates the table of contents and glossary. Future revisions to the database content are automatically updated in every course to which the content material is linked. Course maintenance is

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TECHNOLOGY

more manageable, freeing developers to work with managers on new courses. Among the courses are subjects as diverse as data communications, fiber optics, cable TV, wireless communication and paging.

"We already had the *BASELINE* concept to house and retrieve the information," says Linda Graham, director of curriculum development. "However, we needed to take *BASELINE* from concept into a usable reality. The opportunity came with the NOCV order-entry training project because implementing the NOCV would require the training of many diverse job functions, necessitating tailored course modules. With *BASELINE*, we create the information once, and then it's used by all affected employees—no matter what their titles or functions."

Training "live." Next, GTE's education and training staff developed a computer program to simulate the order-entry environment of NOCV. Because NOCV resides on a computer, a computer simulation was the logical choice. The training program simulates the order-entry screens that the employee is required to fill with customer data. Data include the customer's name, address and request for service. The benefit of a simulation is that it provides suggestions and online help for the student. The live NOCV system provides only error messages if the student performs incorrectly.

Not only did the computer-assisted instruction (CAI) alleviate the need for an instructor to be available to answer all questions during the training, it also allowed the computer, rather than the instructor, to be the immediate *expert* on the system. The CAI's simulated screens provide "training with the training wheels on," says Julie Firouzi, manager of consumer markets, who was in charge of the NOCV training project.

GTE used its intranet to provide ongoing and constantly updated training, adding more emphasis to its computer-aided instruction. The company became a firm believer in using the intranet after education and training's advanced technologies group developed Web pages for various work groups to meet their needs. For example, GTE's carrier operations group prepared most of its self-paced

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Even with technology-based learning opportunities, HR should still strive for a proper mix of learning options. If your employees seem unmotivated in classroom settings, think more out-of-the-box.

mance help system for training and production environments. It supports the user with structured guidance through each task performed and allows random as well as linear access to the information. The case-based organization uses hypertext markup language (HTML) links to access additional layers. "This is geared to both visual and verbal learners," says Firouzi, stressing that human beings learn differently. "It provides structural guidance for common user tasks, not a thick manual for employees. And we can regionalize information as needed."

The advantages are enormous. The training on the evolving order-entry system is updated transparently to users in real time. Order-entry employees can access intranet help on NOCV functionality as they assist customers. Employees learn at their own pace, and the intranet is always available to them to use for refresher training needs. In addition, employees can access this training at their desks, reducing the need for training time away from the work site.

Another high-tech solution developed for the NOCV training project is nicknamed "LAN in a Box." This technology provides training sites that don't have

LAN (local area network) access, and it simulates the infrastructure required for GTE intranet access. Costing approximately \$500 for equipment that fits into a metal suitcase, LAN in a Box allows trainers to set up a LAN in any location, such as a hotel conference room, hooking up 16 PCs to GTE's mainframe using one high-speed modem.

Let the training begin. With the training solutions in place, HR's education and training staff prepared employees by providing videos that explained NOCV and the training process to all affected work groups. In addition, NOCV coordinators disseminated information throughout the planning process to ensure managers understood the training schedule, which began in early 1997 with a pilot program.

Even with a 60 percent reduction in staff, the education and training group, tasked with providing 2.5 million student hours a year, is able to provide as much or more training to customers using these new technological methods.

However, GTE's education and training staff doesn't believe in using "technology for technology's sake," Graham says. "It must meet a practical need and

help impart knowledge." Lander says these solutions can work for large or small companies because many off-the-shelf software programs can provide high-tech training programs to smaller companies that otherwise wouldn't be able to access or afford them.

While GTE's education and training staff know there will always be a need for instructor-led training, they see instructors of the future more as facilitators and mentors. "What we're striving for is a proper mix of learning options," Lander notes. "No one kind of training is always better than any other type of training. Our aim is to meet customer needs with the right type of training in the right place at the right time." ■

Karen A. Rayl is a free-lance communicator and trainer in Grapevine, Texas. She has more than 20 years experience in corporate communications and now consults and trains in communications and career transition. E-mail sunoob@workforcemag.com to forward comments to the editor.

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