

Smart New World: Distance Learning Propels Quiet Revolution

By Jeremy S. Lurey, Ph.D.

A quiet revolution in workplace training is occurring as more and more businesses are discovering they must rely on knowledge sharing at every level of the organization to make their way through the uncharted waters of eBusiness, promote continuous learning and meet other challenges. This revolution is twofold. It standardizes certain kinds of knowledge on a global basis. And it provides the knowledge as courseware delivered over the Internet.

"In the emerging global economy, it is impossible to do business unless everybody speaks the same language," according to Lori Serrano, director of human resources at Click2Learn. "I don't mean that everybody has to speak English, French or Chinese, but they have to have the same knowledge base, so that when you send somebody a message regarding a particular quality standard, for example, the person at the other end of the line understands exactly what you're talking about."

As globalization continues, many companies find it increasingly difficult to meet the training needs of both management and staff. With today's employees regularly working in remote locations spread across vast geographic distances, traditional formal training strategies involving expert led workshops are less and less practical. It is no longer cost effective, or strategically viable, to teach all classroom workshops at a single centralized location. This is particularly true in hospitality, which is a "high touch," people-intensive industry. People remain the most important assets of a hospitality organization, but ensuring employees are uniformly and consistently well trained across geographically distant properties is a growing challenge.

Advances in communication and networking technologies offer powerful ways to share knowledge and develop geographically dispersed employees. Training strategies based on the principles of distance learning offer diverse benefits. Distance learning can address the need for increased productivity of educational programs, cost reduction and access to larger numbers of people. Training can be designed with greater scalability and flexibility. Real-time updates and just-in-time information access can be offered, as well as the ability to deliver coursework at home and work. Students can control pacing, sequencing and style of interaction.

To address these issues comprehensively, Arthur Andersen developed the Virtual Learning Network (VLN) as a best practice learning methodology powered by the interactive potential of the Web. VLN supports the successful enterprise-wide implementation of this learning environment with professional services that include software integration, curriculum modeling, instructional design, learning management, performance reporting and change enablement. The VLN approach and technology facilitates knowledge sharing and collaboration and enables real-time review and coordination of learning activities. It is a methodology and a set of deliverables that codify Arthur Andersen's approach in supporting clients as they design and implement knowledge sharing and training, and development solutions.

Author's note: This paper was originally co-authored with Richard A. Greenberg and published in Arthur Andersen's "Hospitality and Leisure Executive Report", Summer 2000 Volume 7, No. 2. Reprints are available online at Plus Delta's website at www.plusdelta.net. You can also contact the author directly at 866.PLS.DLTA or via email at jslurey@plusdelta.net.

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Hospitality 2000: The People, the global research study investigating human capital trends in hospitality, explored training issues facing the hospital industry.¹ Only slightly more than half of the senior executives polled last year said they were using computer-based training, but 87 percent reported plans for the future. Best practice methodologies that use distance learning will be of paramount importance to hospitality organizations as they seek to upgrade what has been an area of particular challenge to the industry.

What is distance learning?

Distance learning techniques have been under development for several years as both the educational environment and technology applications have evolved (See Figure 1). Initially, this type of learning consisted of any type of training or education that used a computer as a basic learning tool. Computer-based training (CBI) predominately engaged a learner by pushing training content to him or her through a CD-ROM or computer diskette. More advanced methods of CBT distributed course content through the company's own internal network or Intranet. During these initial stages, very little material was delivered via the Internet.

Figure 1: Changing Educational Environment

<i>Past Instructor Centered</i>		<i>Present: Learner Centered</i>
Lecture		Facilitation
Student as listener		Student as collaborator
Individual		Team learning
Instructor as source		Instructor as guide
Stable content		Dynamic content
Homogeneity		Diversity
Evaluation and testing		Performance
<i>Source: Arthur Andersen</i>		

Regardless of the distribution channel, this type of self-paced study provides individuals with the opportunity to learn critical information when it is needed. These core CBT methodologies, however, isolate the learner from the broader training environment. By simply providing contact with the course content available on the learner's computer, this vehicle falls short of providing an open channel for direct two-way communication with the instructor. More recent technological advances have provided a solution to this essential need. Contemporary definitions of distance learning, therefore, refer to any instruction or learning activity that occurs in an environment, mediated by computers and data networks, where the instructors and learners are able to maintain direct communications among all participants in the training process - without being located in the same place. One expert differentiates distance learning from other forms of CBT with the following three criteria²:

1. Primary interactions among instructors and learners are separated by geographic distance;
2. Two-way interactive communication is present among all participants; and
3. Technology is used to facilitate the learning experience.

Distance learning strategies allow individuals to participate in training sessions at locations remote from the normal classroom setting. In addition, this training often occurs during



times other than normal working hours - twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. By using these advanced information technologies, learners not only have access to the training content they require, but also can communicate with other participants, which makes the learning experience far more effective.

The technology, then, creates a virtual classroom where learners and instructors alike can participate in asynchronous communications, like email or bulletin boards, as well as real-time communications, such as Internet chats or two-way satellite transmissions. Most of these technologies can be divided into two separate categories - interactive and non-interactive³. The primary difference between the two is that interactive tools provide a channel for two-way communication, while non-interactive tools offer only one-way communication channels. To create an interactive learning environment, then, non-interactive technologies require additional connectivity from phone, fax or other interactive tools (See Figure 2.)

We learn best through community

The Internet age puts great value on the capacity to put extraordinary amounts of information at a single person's fingertips. But we don't learn that way, according to James A. Finkelstein, an Arthur Andersen partner in Human Capital Services. "We learn best through community, when we get information in context." It is high time, Finkelstein contends, that "all that fuzzy stuff, such as people and context, gets woven into technology from the start."

Figure 2: Distance Learning Technologies

<i>Interactive</i>	<i>Non-interactive</i>
Audio conferences	One-way satellite/microwave
Audio graphics	Radio
Videoconferences	Printed materials
Computer conferences via internet or email	Audiotape
Two-way satellite/microwave	Computer diskette/CD-ROM
Desktop videoconferences	Videotape
One-way satellite keypad	Cable/broadcast television
Voicemail	
Virtual reality	

Source: Arthur Andersen

Most distance learning programs are used to supplement more traditional training efforts and fail in one key way: they do not factor in the critical component of building communities. Most current techniques, as a result, are used more for basic information delivery and exchange, such as distributing course materials and establishing initial conversations on the training topic. As a result, they do not fully take advantage of enabling technologies or the potential for creating a powerful learning environment. The Internet allows learner anywhere to use their PCs to tap into courses taught by the world's greatest minds. But if such distance learning relegates them to isolation, it will be a waste. By incorporating available online technologies and communication channels with context and community, instructional designers can create a learning environment for ongoing interactive dialogue.



Indeed, a distance learning system integrates five elements: learners and content, the process people (instructors, designers, managers and support staff), communications technologies and organizational context. Too exclusive a focus on the technology results in equipment-driven, rather than needs-driven decision-making. Distance learning, as a result, demands that instructors develop new skills and innovation in the application of more traditional skills. Voice, video and data connections must be seamless. Technical support must be consistent and convenient.

Regardless of the specific program, these distance learning models can be very effective at streamlining processes and providing significant benefits to the organization, including:

- **Reduced Operating Costs** – This is often one of the main business drivers justifying the implementation of distance learning models. As more staff members are trained away from the standard classroom environment, requirements for dedicated training facilities and leased space are reduced, as are travel costs.
- **Improved Productivity** – Training participants who spend less time in the classroom can spend more time focusing on their regular work tasks.
- **Employee Satisfaction** - As businesses become more technology-driven, workers question the need to travel to participate in training programs they know could be performed remotely. Companies can invest in employee satisfaction by enabling distance learning technologies and processes

In addition to these organizational benefits, individual learners may experience specific benefits that enhance their training experience, including:

- **Opportunity for Self-Paced Learning** – Distance learning provides more flexibility to individual learners because they are not forced to abide by formal classroom training schedules.
- **Available Just in Time** - Training materials and other resources are available any time, so learners can access this information as soon as they identify a specific training need.
- **Accessible over a Wide Geographic Area** - All materials are available anywhere participants can take, or have access to, a computer.

Finally, there are several specific benefits that training and development professionals in the hospitality industry can expect to receive from implementing distance learning strategies:

- **Standardized Training Approach** – Training and development professionals are able to emphasize collaborative learning for all training participants and provide an increased breadth and depth of course content.
- **Centralized Document Control** – Training and development professionals are able to centralize authorship and document version control, thus streamlining the development and deployment of all training materials.
- **Online Registration and Tracking** – Learners will be able to locate and select



individual training courses online and enroll themselves directly. As they complete related coursework, all test scores, performance evaluations and/or certifications can be conveniently tracked in the centralized learning management system and easily downloaded for real-time reporting.

How is a distance learning program developed?

Distance learning programs succeed to the extent that they are viewed as an integral part of a company's goals and training program. Distance learning programs, faculty and students need to be integrated into the institutional mainstream. Other keys to success include encouraging a focus on the content (not the technology), marketing the programs internally and externally, and using on-site coordination for remote locations.

Before attempting to design or develop any customized online training materials, it is important to step back and consider the overall plan for the training program. With any type of training, whether traditional classroom workshops or interactive Internet chats, the first step is to define the learning objectives in the context of the business goals. Once the learning objectives have been identified, a learning approach with enabling technologies can be designed.

There are three different types of learning objectives:

- Cognitive objectives are based on simply communicating new ideas or information to learners.
- Attitudinal objectives address individual values or beliefs.
- Performance-based objectives are oriented toward helping learners to perform a specific task.

Distance learning is most effective at achieving cognitive and attitudinal learning goals.⁴ If learners internalize course concepts and think about enacting new behaviors on the job, they have then achieved these learning objectives. On the other hand, performance-based objectives are more difficult to measure because learners are actually required to do something, and it is difficult for instructors to observe proficiencies when they are not located in the same room as the learners.

Depending upon the learning objectives, different training approaches may be warranted. For example, if only a cognitive learning experience is being provided, then training based on distribution of printed materials and formal lecture might be appropriate. Attitudinal training might require more interactive dialogue and group discussion to obtain the learning objectives. Performance-based learning lends itself towards more participatory activities, such as simulated exercises and role-plays.

Many cognitive objectives can be easily achieved through low-cost, non-interactive technologies that support basic distribution of materials and lecture formats. Attitudinal objectives may require a mix of technologies to provide more interactive discussions. Performance-based objectives need a mix of interactive technologies as well.

With an understanding of what technologies might be required, it is necessary to assess what systems are already in place within the organization. To the extent possible, it is beneficial to use existing technical infrastructure (i.e., corporate email systems, shared



networks.' etc.) and minimize any additional technical requirements. The high costs associated with interactive technologies will frequently inhibit the ability to create the type of learning environment envisioned, so involving technical support staff early in the decision-making process is essential.

Future trends in distance learning

As the rapid development of technology continues, skill requirements for all employees will continue to increase. There is abundant evidence of that trend in the hospitality industry, particularly as front and back-office systems are upgraded, and networked technology increasingly becomes an interface with customers. At the same time, rapid technological change presents ample opportunity for training and development professionals to use emerging technologies. These powerful tools make it easier to identify new ways to deliver training and enhance the learning process. These advances in technology, then, will revolutionize the way training is delivered. The nature of work and the availability of technology have combined to make distance learning an extremely attractive, if not essential, option.

The current challenge for training and development professionals, then, is posed by *how* to best meet training needs. Before jumping ahead and requesting access to additional equipment and communication channels though, it is important to clearly identify the objectives of the training program. This understanding is essential to formalize the training strategy and identify the appropriate tools to support the learning process.

As distance learning technologies become more prevalent, it will be increasingly important to determine the most appropriate learning vehicles, given a specific situation and organizational goals. Only with increased awareness will more effective distance learning experiences occur and hospitality organizations gain the benefits possible in this quiet revolution.

¹ Roger C Cline, Lalia Rach, Ed.D., James A. Landry, Ph.D. Lynne Davidson, Ph.D. (1997) *Hospitality 2000: The People*. Arthur Andersen and New York University Center for Hospitality, Tourism and Travel Administration.

² D.R. Garrison. (1994). *Understanding Distance Education: A Framework for the Future*.

³ Mary O'Neil (Ed.) (1986). Infoline. *Effective Distance Learning*. ASTD.

⁴ E.C. Thatch and Karen L. Murphy (1995, December) *Training via Distance Learning*. Training & Development. (pp. 44-46).



About the Author

Dr. Jeremy S. Lurey is the Chief Executive Officer of Plus Delta Consulting, LLC. Dr. Lurey specializes in leadership and organization development, and he works with senior executives and business leaders to improve performance and implement positive changes in their organizations. He has particular expertise in strategic planning, executive and management development, change management, business process improvement, and team effectiveness. With more than 15 years experience as a management consultant, Dr. Lurey has supported clients ranging from small start-up organizations to multi-national Fortune 100 corporations, including several not-for-profit and government agencies. He holds MS and PhD degrees in Organizational Psychology from the Marshall Goldsmith School of Management, and in addition to his role as a consultant, Dr. Lurey serves as an Adjunct Faculty member at the Graziadio School of Business and Management. He frequently presents at professional conferences and seminars and has authored several publications on organization development, change management, and leadership excellence. Before establishing Plus Delta, he worked at both PricewaterhouseCoopers and Andersen Consulting.

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