

# ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ONLINE LEARNING

*By Gary James*

Never before in the training world have so many delivery options been available with so much information and knowledge to convey to our trainees. How do you select the right delivery medium for your audience and your content?

As was addressed in last month's column, the Internet and intranet hold tremendous potential for the rapid dissemination of knowledge and information to a worldwide workforce—when utilized correctly. In fact, Elliott Masie, president of the Masie Center, a New York-based training think tank, estimated that 92 percent of large organizations will use some form of online learning this year.

There are several distinct advantages and disadvantages of designing, developing, and delivering web-based training. By carefully weighing your audience and training content against this list of advantages and disadvantages, you should be able to better judge if what you have in mind is right for Web dissemination.

## **ADVANTAGES:**

- (1) **Extendibility, Accessibility, and Suitability** - Users can proceed through a training program at their own pace and at their own place. They can also access the training at any time, receiving only as much as they need. In other words, "just in time and just enough."
- (2) **Quicker (and cheaper) turnaround** of finished product.
- (3) **Collaborative and exploratory** learning environments.
- (4) **Easy and affordable training delivery** - Chances are (and you'll want to access this before embarking on WBT) your audience has access to a browser. Validate what browser(s) your audience has and what version(s) and you can capitalize on the delivery vehicle.
- (5) **Cross Platform** - WBT can be accessed by web browsing software on any platform: windows, MAC, Unix, etc. Basically, you can deliver your training course to any machine over the Internet or company intranet without having to develop a different course for each unique platform.
- (6) **Inexpensive worldwide distribution** - No separate or distinct distribution mechanism is needed (i.e., distributing CD-ROMs for CBT training). WBT can be accessed from any computer anywhere in the world while at the same time keeping delivery costs down.
- (7) **Reduced technical support** - Web-based training courses decrease some of the more "potent and deadly" technical support issues that often enshroud technology-based training.
- (8) **Ease of content update** - The changes you make to any of your content are immediately available to your learning audience across the world.
- (9) **Installation options** on private networks for security or greater bandwidth. If you opt for intranet delivery, you have more control over plug-ins and bandwidth, giving you more options for inclusion in your WBT.

- (10) **Travel cost and time savings** - Learning is delivered directly to the learner instead of the other way around.
- (11) **Web browsers and Internet connections are widely available** - Most computer users have access to a browser, such as IE4 or Netscape and are connected to a company's intranet, and/or have access to the Internet.
- (12) **WBT-based development is easier to learn** and pick up than CBT-based development. You should be able to draw from a larger pool of WBT developers than is available for creating traditional CBT.
- (13) **Vast, untapped market for training** - The untapped WBT market is still large. If you're looking for commercial markets, the Internet also offers a huge audience hungry for material via the Net.
- (14) **Access is controllable** - You can direct and monitor who receives web training - when, how many times, and in what sequence.
- (15) **Billing options** - You can bill—and collect on that bill—through Net distribution, billing by user ID, number of accesses, date/time of access, or any other means by which you want to assess usage.
- (16) **Direct access to many other training resources** - The Internet gives access to the largest library in the world. Capitalize on the offerings that have already been created, and use them to enhance the learning you are distributing.

#### **DISADVANTAGES:**

- (1) **Limited formatting of content in current browsers** - The WBT you create will not resemble the CBT you might be familiar with because of Net bandwidth constraints. So if your content relies on a lot of media “bells and whistles,” or particular formatting, the Net might not be the best delivery medium.
- (2) **Bandwidth/browser limitations may restrict instructional methodologies** - Again, you are constrained by the technology. If your content relies on a lot of video, audio, or intense graphics, and your audience isn't on a T1 line, Net delivery will only frustrate your learners.
- (3) **Limited bandwidth means slower performance** for sound, video, and large graphics. Know the bandwidth available to your audience—and what's reasonable “wait” time for them—before you commit to the Net. On average, most mobile end-users are still running on a 28.8 kpbs connection.
- (4) **Someone must provide web server access, control usage, and bill users (if applicable)** - The Net doesn't magically solve all of your resource issues. Plan on having someone oversee some of these issues.
- (5) **Time required for downloading applications** - Again, be very, very aware of download times—and we still recommend looking at delivery options considering a 28.8 kpbs modem if you are delivering training to an external audience or over the Internet. Your training might be great, but if your audience isn't patient enough to wait for it to download, it doesn't matter.
- (6) **Student assessment and feedback is limited** - The Internet provides a wonderful means to get all kinds of information back and forth to your audience, but it also makes it harder to assess some types of student feedback and information.
- (7) **Many, if not most, of today's web-based training programs are too static, with little if any interactivity** - This is probably due to the bandwidth limitation, but if we

- deliver poor, page-turning training, we can't expect stellar results from our learners.
- (8) **Cannot design and develop robust multimedia courses** - The bandwidth limitations of the Net constrain what can be delivered effectively.
  - (9) **Are computers replacing human contact?** - The Net is not right for all training.
  - (10) **Newness** - It may take longer designing and developing WBT courses, the first time around. Because of its recent emergence to the training arena, new technologies always require time, experience, and money in order to take full advantage of its capabilities. The great thing, however, is you'll learn new skills and knowledge with each new course.
  - (11) **Web-based training has high-fixed costs** - Some people assume that since you don't need a CD-ROM drive, you have no additional costs. Not so. It's important that you consider doing a pilot before proceeding further into the WBT game. Validate what works well, when, and at what it cost.

*Gary W. James is a corporate trainer and instructional design consultant at Allen Communication, and holds a masters degree in adult education and learning with an emphasis in instructional technology and design. This article represents a small portion of an in-depth, 2-day hands-on web-based training seminar that he will be presenting across the United States in August and September. Visit [www.allencomm.com/events](http://www.allencomm.com/events) for more information on dates and locations of the seminar.*