

# eLearning: Is It Right For Your Business?

## For A Small Firm, eLearning Can Be A Cost Effective Option To

by Barbara Carnes

eLearning is taking the business world by storm. Can small businesses benefit from this latest trend—some would call it a craze—in employee development?

These days, small businesses use computers and the Internet for everything from keeping track of inventory to reducing heating and cooling costs. So why not employee training?

**What is eLearning?** This term covers a number of different types of learning that is delivered via the computer. Computer-based training (CBT) is the oldest form of eLearning, and is delivered by CDs distributed to the trainees. Regardless of the topic, there is a combination of information-sharing, quizzes or questions, audio and possibly video clips. The training will most likely be organized into short units that the trainee completes at his convenience.

A newer format for eLearning is via the Internet, also known as Web-based training. The content of the training is similar to CBT, but with this format the course content can easily be changed and updated, and the trainee doesn't have to have the CD with him. Whether at the office, at home, or in a hotel room, the training course is accessible.

The Internet also makes possible another type of eLearning known as synchronous or real-time learning. In this format, instructor and student(s) are online and connected at the same time, much like a chatroom. This makes it possible to have discussions and interaction with the instructor and other students. Written assignments are usually completed and sent to the instructor via e-mail.

The newest form of eLearning is known as blended learning. Several learning media such as classroom, teleconference, and Internet, are combined into one course. Students might begin with a teleconference, then get together for a one-day classroom workshop, and follow up with Web-based training. The advantage of blended learning is that it appeals to trainees who may not learn well in the more self-directed formats of CBT or traditional Web-based eLearning, and it appeals to trainees who learn best when they have interaction with their instructor and other students.

**Who uses eLearning?** Larger organizations were the first to jump on the bandwagon of eLearning. Companies, such as IBM, Motorola, Cisco Systems, and Graybar Electric, currently offer a substantial portion of their training programs online. Universities and colleges are also offering classes and entire degree programs online. Locally, Webster University and the University of Missouri-St. Louis are among those who offer MBA degrees in online programs. While most of the eLearning courses created are written by large organizations for their employees or by universities for their students, individuals and small businesses are increasingly beginning to use online learning resources. Because they do not have the resources to develop their own learning modules, small businesses and individuals need to find already-developed courses not restricted to learners from a specific organization or institution.

**Is eLearning effective?** The answer is "yes"...and "no." Several recent studies have found that trainees learned up to 30% more in eLearning courses than they did in traditional classroom training, for the same content. We might conclude that eLearning is more effective than traditional classroom training, right? Not necessarily. Many people who enroll in eLearning courses don't complete them. Hard numbers aren't available as yet, but one only needs to look or ask around to discover that many individuals who sign up for and begin eLearning courses don't finish them. There

are several reasons for noncompletion: distractions and interruptions while working on the course, unrealistic expectations of the time commitment required, or lack of accountability (that is, nobody knows or cares whether or not the student completes the course). The new blended learning approach is an attempt to overcome some of these issues. With some face-to-face, or voice-to-voice interaction, the trainee is more "hooked into" the learning experience, the instructor, and possibly the other students. This interaction builds accountability, and that motivates the trainee to continue with the course.

## Traditional Training

It is important to note that the quality of available eLearning courses is very uneven. This is especially true when it comes to courses available to the public. Some courses are excellent, while others are virtually worthless. Choose carefully.

**How can a small-business owner use eLearning?**

Small businesses have always faced the problem of numbers when it comes to training. Unlike larger companies who can develop their own training courses or hire consultants to develop training especially for them, a small business often must take advantage of training that is available on the open market. Even if there are enough employees to hold training just for your company, eLearning can be a cost-effective alternative. If employees are dispersed geographically, whether around the globe or simply around town, eLearning is a cost-effective alternative to transporting everyone to a single location for training. By eliminating hotel, meals, and travel expenses, more money is available for the training itself. Even if employees are in the same city, it is often difficult for all of them to get away at the same time and still keep the business running. With eLearning, each employee is able to log in and be trained at a time that suits their schedule. This is also an advantage if only one or two employees need training.

**Is eLearning right for all types of training?**

No. eLearning is not appropriate for all types of training. If your purpose is to give or get information, eLearning is definitely a good choice. However, if your goal is to develop skills, particularly people types of skills, such as customer service, sales or management, eLearning may not be effective. Some training experts maintain that it's inappropriate and ineffective to train people skills using nonhuman means. Other experts claim that by using video clips and other forms of simulation, eLearning can actually be more effective than the traditional classroom for people-skills training. One director of training for a large company uses this guideline: if the purpose is to give information, eLearning is the answer. If the purpose is to train skills (technical or people skills), his answer is to train in a classroom.

### **Where can a small business find eLearning courses or other resources?**

This depends on the type of eLearning courses you are seeking. For industry-specific courses, check out your industry trade associations. Many of these organizations have recently launched online courses or even entire curriculums in some cases. Expect to pay a fee for most of them, usually less than, or the same, as the fee for a comparable classroom course. For example, a financial services industry eLearning website is: [www.abalearning.com](http://www.abalearning.com).

Another place to find eLearning courses are portals, which are websites that serve as clearing houses for many different producers of eLearning. The learning courses featured on these sites are not industry-specific, although they may be specialized. Several portals I found recently were: [www.elearners.com](http://www.elearners.com),

[www.click2learn.com](http://www.click2learn.com), and [www.trainseek.com](http://www.trainseek.com).

A third place to find eLearning courses is sites produced by the vendors of specific eLearning courses. For courses on management, supervision, and similar topics, try [www.crisplearning.com](http://www.crisplearning.com) and [www.worldwidelearn.com](http://www.worldwidelearn.com). For IT and IT management courses, check out [www.KnowledgePool.com](http://www.KnowledgePool.com).

### **Are there lots of resources available?**

A recent thirty-minute search on the Web was very enlightening. An AOL search using the term "eLearning" yielded 96 hits. The types of sites included industry-specific eLearning sites, sites featuring software for developing eLearning courses, a few universities who offer online courses, portals, and single-vendor sites. A similar search on Yahoo yielded 46 hits and similar results. The same search term on Alta Vista yielded an unmanageable 39,617 hits. The search term "online learning courses" on Alta Vista yielded 96,000 hits. Interestingly, a much higher percentage of these listings (no, I didn't look at all 96,000) were sites that actually offer online learning courses than was the case using the search term "eLearning." Even though eLearning is very new, it's amazing how many resources there are out there!

### **How can I evaluate an eLearning course I'm considering?**

Because the quality is uneven and standards are nonexistent, you may want to "try before you buy." If, after you begin a course, you find that the course you have purchased is not of the same quality as the course you previewed, you should certainly request a refund.

### **Is special equipment required to take eLearning courses?**

To get the most out of a course, it's best to have at least 125k of RAM, a video card, and an audio card. Some people insist that a T1 line is also necessary, while others believe that a dial-up connection will work just fine. This probably depends on the person's tolerance for the slower or variable speed of a dial-up connection.

How do you access it? Enrolling is easy. It's like any other e-commerce transaction. You give a credit card number, and you're assigned a code. You use this code to gain entry to a protected part of the website (or a completely different web address), and you are set to begin or continue your course.

eLearning is increasing in popularity. A recent survey conducted by Training/HRD, a leading trade journal for the training industry, found that 15% of businesses surveyed indicated they were currently delivering some of their training via eLearning. They also indicated that they expected this figure to increase by 50% over the next 2 years.

As more and more businesses jump on the eLearning bandwagon, perhaps you should not be left behind. Investigate how you and your business can take advantage of this newest means of employee and professional development.

*Dr. Barbara Carnes (Bcarnes428@aol.com) is the president of Carnes and Associates, Inc., a local human resource development firm specializing in leadership, management and supervisor training, coaching, and team building; and coauthor of two books: "Making Training Stick" and "The Making Training Stick Field Guide."*