Delaware North Companies Inc. (DNC), a hospitality and food services provider based in Buffalo, N.Y., with 40,000 employees globally, used to rely on local executives and HR managers to give management training to new supervisors, but results varied widely.

Last year, DNC began to roll out a four-level program for its 3,000 managers—front-line supervisors to top executives—that delivers self-paced interactive training via the web, followed by virtual classes. The higher-level course work will also include face-to-face meetings and group projects.

“The virtual classroom is proving to be highly successful when we need to deliver basic concepts around foundational management skills,” says John Kist, DNC manager of talent development.

DNC and a growing number of organizations use the web to train employees in management, teamwork, ethics, languages and other soft skills. As they expand globally, these companies rely on such e-learning to deliver cost-effective soft-skills training with reach, consistency and some of the richness of classroom-based training.

Online Delivery
Companies began to use computer-based training a few decades ago,
and many have used web-based learning for about a decade, mainly for information technology and other hard skills. Given the growing appeal of “Web 2.0” tools such as instant messaging and web conferencing, soft-skills training via these social-networking tools has a promising outlook. (For more on Web 2.0, see “Counting on Collaboration” on page 47 of the October 2007 issue of HR Magazine.)

Game-like simulations and 3-D worlds similar to the popular Second Life also have potential for teaching soft skills. Companies such as IBM, Cisco, Intel and the oil companies are looking into this, says Eilif Trondsen, who studies technology-enabled learning as program and research director at SRI Consulting Business Intelligence in Menlo Park, Calif. “But it is early. Not a lot are jumping in with both feet.”

Those who are putting their toes in the water are excited about the possibilities. “We’re going to do more with e-learning,” predicts Jennie Carlson, executive vice president and director of HR for U.S. Bancorp in Minneapolis. “I’m not sure what the limit is for soft-skills development.”

U.S. Bancorp recently launched a mentoring program via the web, and Carlson’s HR staff members are looking into providing other soft-skills training through e-learning. “To attract the younger generation, we need to make learning fun, interesting and easy, and one way to do that is through technology,” she says.

Managers in many other companies understand that the younger generation already does just about everything on cell phones, computers and networks, and will expect to use these tools when they enter the workforce. For this reason, companies are finding ways to deliver soft skills such as management and language training, and mentoring, through e-learning.

Management Training At DNC

DNC provides hospitality and food services to national parks, stadiums, airports and other venues. It launched an e-learning management program last year. Each level includes self-paced interactive modules that managers complete online, with follow-up meetings in a virtual classroom via conference phone calls. In the virtual class, a teacher uses an electronic white board, polling and other features to see what participants know and to glean examples to share among learners.

Learning Hours Delivered By Technology-Based Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>39.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>36.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>37.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>34.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>16.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>14.38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2006 ASTD Benchmark Study of Learning.

At the highest level of the DNC management training, regional and other top executives also participate in project-based activities, group assignments and other activities in actual classrooms.

Kist says, “Feedback from the learners has helped us identify what topics are working best in [the virtual] environment.” The feedback came from a pilot project involving entry-level and mid-level managers in the airports business unit. General soft skills such as managing a team, effective communication techniques, delegation, empowerment and conflict resolution were identified as most amenable to online training. Functional and technical skills were found to be best-suited for on-the-job training and training with the local HR professional.

“A virtual learning environment can lay the groundwork for delivering a consistent message on disciplines such as employee relations, career development and succession planning,” Kist says. “A strong partnership among managers and talent development is still critical, which usually requires direct interaction.”

DNC rolled out the first level companywide late last year. In 2008, Kist expects to offer the first level at least twice and the second and third levels at least once. It partners with Element K Corp., a Rochester, N.Y.-based vendor of e-learning and technology.

Like other e-learning vendors, including SkillSoft PLC of Nashua, N.H., Element K offers a catalog of content, consulting services, the platform—including a virtual classroom and learning management system—and other features. David Snider, Element K senior director of marketing, says most customers want some tailoring. DNC programs were custom-tailored only 10 percent, but Kist expects to do more.

Snider says about half of his customers use Element K products for soft-skills training. Customers can host the platform or use it on a software-as-a-service model, as DNC does.

Kist says the first level costs less than $500 per learner.

DNC’s HR staff members apply soft-skills e-learning to themselves. Kist and about 40 other HR professionals—40 percent of the total—study for PHR and SPHR certification. Each learner works on self-paced modules online and then participates in weekly virtual sessions during a 14-week program.

Transferring Knowledge At U.S. Bancorp

Kist predicts that soft-skills e-learning will only increase, explaining, “I eventually want to use this technolo-
U.S. Bancorp officials already do that with a new mentoring program. Before the tacit knowledge of the past 40 years walks out the door with the retiring baby boomers, they want to make sure that the boomers transfer knowledge to younger workers—a task not easy to achieve with 50,000 employees in 49 states and several foreign countries.

The bank’s Mentor Connect program uses the web to match mentors with those who want mentoring. With software developed by Triple Creek Associates Inc. of Greenwood Village, Colo., Mentor Connect gathers demographic and competency information from mentors and from those who want mentoring, and then it suggests matches.

“We’re using technology as an enabler for connection and training,” says Mary Beth Gaietto, Mentor Connect program manager.

The bank’s HR staff members wanted a mentoring program for some time, but saw the dispersed workforce as an impediment. Then, Gaietto discovered Triple Creek. The software assesses mentors’ strengths and makes matches based on the stated needs of those wanting to be mentored.

Chris Browning, vice president of operations and client services at Triple Creek, says the software, called Open Mentoring, has made more than 50,000 matches in 60 countries for several hundred corporate clients. Supporting ethnic diversity is a popular use of mentor relationships, he adds.

U.S. Bancorp piloted Mentor Connect—its internal brand for the Triple Creek software—in March 2007 with 200 employees, and in August rolled it out for all 22,000 exempt employees. Within the first week, 152 relationships were established—95 percent of them agreeable to the partners, Gaietto says. It is too early to know the long-term results of the program, she adds.

Most mentoring sessions take place on the phone between geographically separated employees. Longer term, the company may use more Web 2.0 tools to help pairs communicate and for other soft-skills e-learning.

**Language Training At Reuters**

Reuters Group PLC in London had different organizational needs when it turned to web-based soft-skills training. When Charles Jennings joined as global head of learning five years ago, the company had more than 3,000 suppliers for training, including nearly 100 English schools.

“Apart from the fact that you can’t really manage that many relationships, there’s the issue of consistency,” says Jennings. “If you have soft-skills training offered by an outfit in Chicago for the Chicago office and another source providing the training in London, there’s no way of knowing we are getting like for like.”

Reuters is best known as a news agency, but only 2,500 of its 18,000 employees in 90 countries work in news. About 14,000, including 2,000 in India and 1,800 in Thailand, develop, sell and support financial information products. English is not the native language for at least half of the employees, so language training is a top need, Jennings says.

In 2004, Jennings enlisted GlobalEnglish Corp. of Brisbane, Calif., to deliver English lessons online. GlobalEnglish has more than 400 corporate customers with about 80,000 students in 140 countries, says Deepak Desai, chief executive officer. Employees tap self-paced interactive courses on the Internet.

Now, Reuters funds an outside class or teacher only after an employee masters the e-learning component and if he or she needs specialized English for a job. About 1,000 employees study English via e-learning, Jennings says. The program pre-assesses each learner and then offers a custom program. A virtual language lab connects each learner with a native-English speaker. Pronunciation guides help native speakers of various languages: A native-French speaker, for instance, can get assistance with English words and phrases that are especially difficult for French speakers.

“The feedback from learners and their managers has been good,” Jennings says. “Without being asked, many managers have told me some person doing the GlobalEnglish course has improved his ability to speak and write—it is noticeable.”

Jennings estimates that it costs Reuters less than $500 per learner per year for GlobalEnglish. Reuters recently contracted with Rosetta Stone Ltd., based in Arlington, Va., to provide e-learning in other languages. The methods are somewhat different, but delivery is online.

Jennings was involved in early computer-based training in Europe, and remains a fan of e-learning. At his initiative, Reuters is adopting more e-learning for soft skills, including a business-management program with an online component, and a manager-coaching program delivered online. “I’m a totally unreconstructed collaborative-learning adherent,” he says. “Web 2.0 really gives us the opportunity to live and work and learn in virtual communities.”

**Evaluating Effectiveness**

Despite the success of individual companies using these web-based tools, measuring soft-skills training delivered via e-learning is no easier than measuring soft-skills training delivered the old-fashioned way.

“There are not a lot of numbers out there about whether certain e-learning is effective because what they’re measuring is how much money they’re saving or how many people
they’re reaching,” says Ryann Ellis, editor of Learning Circuits, a web-based publication on e-learning for the American Society for Training & Development (ASTD), an association for training professionals, based in Alexandria, Va. It is relatively easy to measure the learning of hard skills, whether they’re taught in a classroom or online. Someone who has studied C++ programming can be tested with appropriate problems. Soft skills are another story, according to Ellis. “When you talk about soft-skills training through e-learning, you have the same problems of measuring as you do in traditional training,” she says.

Assessing the contribution to business goals represents a broader issue for all training, separate from the delivery method. Officials in few companies begin to adopt workforce analytics to help them see mathematical correlations between, say, a mentoring program and employee retention. (For more on analytics generally and how to assess a mentoring program specifically, see “Data-Driven Human Capital Decisions” on page 105 of the March 2007 issue of HR Magazine.)

Despite the uncertainty about whether learning is taking place or contributing to goals, the trend will be to deliver more learning of all kinds via e-learning. ASTD annual benchmarking studies show a steady increase in the use of e-learning with no breakdown on how much is for soft skills. (See “Learning Hours Delivered by Technology-Based Methods’’

Although she has reservations about measuring the transfer of soft-skills knowledge, Ellis continues to push online training. “There is certainly great potential,” she says. “It deserves both skepticism and experimentation.”

Bill Roberts is contributing editor for technology at HR Magazine.

Online Resources

For additional information about using technology to teach employees soft skills, see the online version of this article at www.shrm.org/hrmagazine for links to:

- A 2005 SHRM Special Expertise Panel trends report on organizational development.
- A description of Sun Microsystems’ virtual workplace, including a video demonstration.
- A 2006 SHRM research report on leadership development.
- A SHRM article about future skills required for HR executives.
- Case studies and research studies of simulations learning.

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