Opinion: Let's Meet on the Web

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With new generations of computer systems arriving faster than ever, motor carriers must train a large, scattered and mobile workforce without draining profits and tying up manpower.

One solution, ironically, has grown out of the very phenomenon that gave rise to the problem: technology. While training continues to be rooted in human interaction, systems providers are making telling use of Web-conferencing to improve computer education and save carriers hundreds of thousands of dollars and countless hours lost to travel and time away from work.

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In the conventional model, systems providers travel to sites or designated carrier employees, usually information technology or office personnel, and visit locations selected by the provider.

Such training sessions usually involve trips lasting a day or more. The primary employees who are trained might then become the trainers for the carrier's organization, themselves traveling to different locations, often designating people they have trained to turn around and train other employees.

These are traditional training models that have been used from the inception of computerization at carrier sites. While they worked well enough for a long time, carriers can no longer afford to tie up key personnel for long periods, pay exorbitant travel expenses and fees and rely on employees trained by providers to get the right message across to untrained employees.

To alleviate this, systems providers and vendors have come up with a new approach to computer training that combines the traditional model with state-of-the-art remote Web-conferencing.

Using this new model, key employees continue to be trained initially in person by the systems provider or vendor at central locations. However, rather than entrusting key employees with training the rest of the company, the new model maintains continuity by training employees in large and small groups through Web-conference sessions offered right at employee workstations.

As a result, all carrier employees are now trained by the same instructors with the same course material without anyone — trainee or teacher — having to leave his or her office or spend any extra time traveling. At the same time, employees have the in-person support of key co-workers who were personally trained.

Workers trained on the Internet have actually reported enjoying the experience because of the convenience and familiarity of Internet use.

There is no need to call the IT department or reserve space at the computer training room — or even have one at all.

Sessions often last as long as two hours and may be presented in a series. Web conferencing technology is sophisticated to the point that, for a comparatively modest added investment, instructors and trainees can use videocamera equipment to see and communicate with each other, and, thanks to modern technology, there are no longer choppy, difficult-to-see images.

Instructors and trainees share control of the screen, so instructors can manipulate screens in response to trainee questions.

The efficiency of the setup can be demonstrated by the fact that one instructor can teach hundreds of people in dozens of locations, perhaps thousands of miles apart, at one time — an impossible feat with in-person techniques.

However, trainers often limit the number of attendees to make sessions manageable and keep that "classroom" feel, enabling personnel to participate fully. Also, there can be immediate feedback so trainers can be sure that all parties are on the same page.

Carriers can get high-quality training and save thousands of dollars. For mere pennies a minute, a conference room full of employees can be brought up to date on newly developed facets of a software system. Remember, the price of one round-trip plane ticket and other travel expenses for on-site training can run close to $1,000 a session.

Compare that to a few dollars spent to access an Internet-based training session. In addition, remote training reduces time lost from work and increases productivity.

But cost reduction is not the whole story. Carriers also need training that is convenient and easy to implement. Web-conferencing meets this need. Without full training, systems would be underutilized and carriers could find themselves at a competitive disadvantage, compared with those who make optimum use of their systems.

A comparison we all can relate to is cellphones. All of us can make and receive calls, but many do not avail themselves of slightly more sophisticated features such as message retrieval, call lists for frequently dialed numbers or text messaging. Cellphones make life easier, but many miss the full benefits of the technology because they have not learned how to use the equipment.

The same holds true with sophisticated computer systems. It is generally accepted that state-of-the-art computerization is the key to carriers' staying competitive and keeping customers happy. Making full use of computerization is another story.

Carriers need to be properly trained on the latest techniques for tracking, dispatching, billing and other applications. With costs of training rising, carriers now have an economic and effective way to fulfill their training needs through Web-conference training.

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