

KEEPING Current

TO STAY SHARP, FIND THE BEST
TRAINING MATCH FOR YOU.



by Steve Perlstein

David Smith spends a lot of money on training for himself—about \$15,000 per year to expand his knowledge of network design, implementation, and support. But Smith and his wife and business partner, Emily, have to carefully consider their options when forking over what amounts to a significant percentage of their income.

“You have to keep current, and I take a training course every three months just in an attempt to keep current with technology and how it changes,” Smith explains. “When you’re working for a big company, they’re paying you to take the training and they’re paying for the training. I appreciate training more now because it comes out of my own pocket.”

Smith and his peers in the IT world have plenty of training options to consider, and that list of options has recently grown to include truly robust online options. In addition, they can choose to take a seminar provided by a vendor; go to a company providing independent, vendor-neutral training; try a local institution like a community or technical college; or take the self-directed route with books or CD-ROMs.

“Currently there are all kinds of different programs—everything from brick-and-mortar classes to more sophisticated online offerings,” says Bob Kile, executive director of the National Association of Communications Systems Engineers (NACSE), a nonprofit organization that offers a training and certification program of its own. “We think online is going to become the standard pretty quickly.”

Kile’s organization offers certification programs, and requires annual recertification and continuing education. While his group requires professionals to take classes every year, Kile insists that that is important for anybody trying to make a living in the IT world.

“IT professionals say, ‘If I’m in training and not billing out time, how do I make any money?’ Sometimes it’s difficult to balance that, but you’ve got to,” Kile says. “If you don’t plan to study the rest of your career, don’t get in this business.”

Smith recently went the online route for the first time. He saw an ad offering a free demo of a Cisco switching course by KnowledgeNet.com, an online training provider located in Scottsdale, Ariz. Not only was it a subject he needed to help a current client, but the week-long class met

every night for five straight days and he could log on from his hotel room after he had finished his work for the day.

“It was just like being in class,” Smith remembers of the program, which featured streaming audio and video and allowed student interaction with the instructor via an online chat system. “The beauty of it was that when the class was finished, I had online access to all the sessions for another four weeks in case I wanted to go over something again. You couldn’t get that in a regular class.”

When he took his first online class, Smith was working on a project that required him to shuttle among three different cities in New Jersey, North Carolina, and Oklahoma, getting on a plane about every other night. He would literally go to class in his hotel room, pack up his laptop, head for the airport, and repeat the process in the next city—billing work hours all the while.

Chris Dragon, KnowledgeNet’s vice president for product development, says his company’s focus on recreating the classroom experience—complete with two instructors team-teaching the class and online mentors whom students can ask questions of live during class or e-mail questions to when class is not in session—is the key to online success for the IT training industry.

“This model is an incredible way to bridge the gap between classroom brick-and-mortar learning and online training,” Dragon says. “Take a look at an individual contractor. Sometimes they get so busy and overwhelmed that it’s hard to stay abreast of the technologies that make them more valuable and get them more work. We make it so they can train anytime, anywhere.

“It’s getting more and more inconvenient for IT professionals to sit in a classroom for five days, but it’s still important to get the training,” he adds.

Of course, online training isn’t for everybody. One alternate option is vendor-provided training. The chief advantage to this avenue, says Marsha Kabakov, director of Microsoft’s training channel, is getting knowledge straight from the source. “These folks are professional instructors with working knowledge and practical experience in developing, implementing, or supporting one or more Microsoft products,” Kabakov says.

Bart Blickenstaff is a believer in heading straight to the vendor for training. He runs TBC Solutions, a Denver-

based four-person consulting firm that specializes in networks, middleware, storage, and security for the telecommunications industry. "At our level, if your people aren't happy with the training they receive, they walk," he says.

There are several aspects of vendor-based training that appeal to Blickenstaff. In addition to the authoritative nature of the training, he likes the idea of spending a concentrated period of time with colleagues from different backgrounds looking to learn about the same product. Also, he has heard from people he has sent to these classes that they consider the trips a good perk—a chance to get out of the office and focus just on learning a new product for a few days.

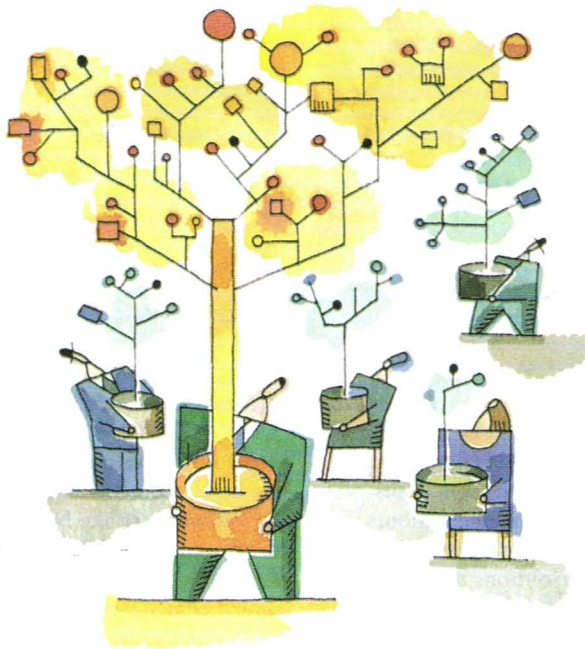
"The most important thing is that, when you go to the vendor site, you're getting what I call complete proprietary knowledge," he explains. "You're going to the source, to the people that created it. I feel like you're getting it straight from the horse's mouth."

Different circumstances call for different types of training, though. If a contractor can't afford to be away from work for a week at a training seminar, spreading that training out over the course of a semester at a local community or technical college is an option.

"There is a definite advantage to taking a course for a semester," says Ruth Bond, acting dean of the business department at the College of Lake County in suburban Chicago. "You get to spend more time on each topic versus in a week-long class, where you might get to spend a half-hour on some things. Also, you get to apply your knowledge right away and use your knowledge as you are learning about it."

Triona Guidry agrees. She is an independent systems consultant in Lake Zurich, Ill., and she not only takes courses at the College of Lake County, but she teaches them as well. "I like the opportunity to take a class that's not crunched into a single week or a single day," she explains. "You're really concentrating on the material. I find private courses like those at New Horizons useful if you need to pick up something quickly, but if you need in-depth study, it's useful to take a semester-long class."

Plus, Guidry says, she can take a class two nights a week at CLC and still be available to help—and bill—her clients during the day. She also points out that most colleges—especially public ones—are often more economical than private options, and they have more financial aid



options. Students also receive college credit they can apply later if they want to seek another degree.

As a college student, Guidry notes, she also has access to the institution's library and research materials. This helps not only while studying for the class, but beyond that as well. "I find the library and the computer labs a great advantage," she says. "I use it for the technical manuals and books that are there that I then don't have to buy. It's a big time- and money-saver for me."

Corporate, vendor-neutral training is a method favored by many. New Horizons Worldwide, Inc., bills itself as the world's largest computer

training provider, with more than \$530 million in revenue in 2000. And while it has just launched a feature-rich online training program, its three-to-five-day training seminars are still the backbone of the company's offerings.

"If you can make the time commitment, that's absolutely a good way to learn," says Chip Nelson, a New Horizons regional vice president based in Santa Barbara, Calif. "You are surrounded by other professionals asking intelligent questions, you can stay after class and go off-topic. You may be working on a deployment of, let's say, a Linux solution and you have to network it with OS/2; you can talk to the instructor about that after class. That opportunity doesn't exist with any other kind of training."

But like NACSE's Kile, Nelson says online learning is the wave of the future. At New Horizons, the company has taken its classroom curriculums and redeployed them in an interactive online environment.

"I don't think that will ever overtake our classroom offerings, but it will complement it," Nelson predicts. "It will grow, but I don't see instructor-led training decreasing. What's going to happen is you will have professionals who haven't taken a course in 16 or 17 months because of time restrictions—they will take a course in the near future."

Kile stresses that whatever type of training an independent professional chooses, he or she had better choose *some* kind of training. About 30 percent of his organization's membership consists of independent contractors and consultants, and this is a point they make again and again.

"Often the first question they are asked is, 'Why should I hire you over the five other guys who submitted RFPs?' This is a real marketing tool," Kile says. ••

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