Access Technologies Group

Effective Integration of Technology and Instructor-Led Training to Promote Soft Skills Mastery

The Soft Skills Imperative

A 2006 America's Promise Alliance report, entitled *Every Child, Every Promise: Turning Failure Into Action*, asserts that soft skills are as important to the success of our youth as the more traditional academic indicators. This finding is consistent with the results of a multitude of employer surveys conducted over the past two decades. While nearly all employers consider soft skills very important to on-the-job effectiveness, 75% of those polled for the 2006 *Are They Ready for Work?* report, however, lamented that the high school graduates representing their incoming entry-level workforce are deficient in the soft skills needed.

> **In his 1995 book, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, Daniel Goleman states, "A combination of competencies that contributes to a person's ability to manage his or herself and relate to other people matters twice as much as IQ or technical skills in job success."**

> **A 2001 report by Public/Private Ventures, *Hard Work on Soft Skills: Creating a Culture of Work in Workforce Development*, provides this caution: "Students who develop hard skills alone may end up being just as hard to employ as those who learn no skills at all."**

Some employers are willing to hire job applicants who are technically qualified and provide training on the soft skills that are lacking. Yet many anecdotal comments included in surveys and business articles indicate a preference for hiring job applicants that possess the desired soft skills and providing training to build technical competence instead. A job applicant's ability to effectively demonstrate soft skills during an interview, therefore, can have a very significant influence on the outcome of his or her job search efforts.

Today's typical soft skills curriculum can best be described as a series of workshops targeting key areas such as job interviewing, professionalism, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. While these instructor-led sessions may include some degree of interaction and role-play, they are, in all likelihood, primarily didactic (lecture-based) in nature. But in order for students to truly internalize the skills that soft skills instructors are attempting to impart, they need opportunities to practice them in a contextual setting. Fortunately, integrating technology into soft skills training can effectively support, reinforce, and augment classroom instruction in order to provide students with the hands-on experiences that they need.

Blended Is Best

Every individual has unique learning styles and preferences, and a curriculum that incorporates multiple instructional strategies will best meet diverse student needs. A

combination of approaches will not only maximize the transfer and application of knowledge, but also enable soft skills instructors to make the most effective use of their face-to-face time with their students.

There are numerous ways in which technology can be weaved into a soft skills curriculum. One of the more robust approaches is to require students to use off-the-shelf e-learning or simulation software in addition to participating in classroom training. This method exposes students to learning experiences that may not be possible in a classroom setting. e-Learning courseware, for example, *compels* students to think critically about the issue at hand, and actively answer every question posed to them. This is in direct contrast to a typical workshop during which an instructor may be satisfied with responses from just one or two students.

Web-based simulations take the experience a step further by portraying scenarios or "stories" in which students act out realistic workplace situations and interactions. They are an engaging way to give personal meaning to the content, increasing students' interest and motivation. Simulations allow students to learn experientially, which leads to greater retention than information that is received passively. By immersing students in a realistic yet "virtual" world, simulations encourage

> **"I hear and I forget.**
> **I see and I remember.**
> **I do and I understand."**
> **—Confucius**

them to explore different behaviors and outcomes without fearing embarrassment or other negative consequences. Additionally, simulations can be completed at each individual's own pace, at their own convenience, and as often as necessary.

e-Learning courseware and simulations offer a wide range of options with respect to a blended soft skills learning curriculum. For example:

- If the courseware or simulation includes printable reference material, instructors can distribute it in *advance* of the training session as pre-work. Students can be asked to reflect on what they have read and summarize their thoughts with a basic drawing or brief written narrative, which they should be prepared to share and discuss with their classmates when the group convenes. Alternatively, instructors can distribute this information *following* the classroom training and encourage students to use it for ongoing reference.

- Students can be asked to complete the courseware or simulation independently *before* participating in the instructor-led training. This will help the instructor identify knowledge and skill gaps and focus the classroom-based segment of the training accordingly. Additionally, because the "basics" have presumably been learned via the technology, the instructor can immediately launch the class into a meaningful discussion or activity pertaining to the targeted soft skill. Using class time to work through case studies in small groups, for instance, will enable the students to apply what they learned during the simulation, and justify their decisions to their peers.

- The instructor may opt to work through the courseware or simulation as a class. Using an overhead projector, the group can decide on the most appropriate choices then explore the feedback or outcomes resulting from those selections. As each person brings his or her own experiences to the learning process, the instructor must be prepared to draw out students' individual perspectives and insights.

- Students can be asked to complete the courseware or simulation independently *after* participating in the instructor-led training. This will reinforce the concepts taught in class, provide additional opportunities to practice the targeted soft skill (in the case of a simulation), and increase retention of what was learned. It will also help the instructor evaluate students' ability to apply the information covered in class, and determine whether follow-up one-on-one coaching or other individual intervention is needed.

As an alternative to e-Learning or Web-based simulations, instructors may choose to incorporate technology on a smaller-scale basis, such as assigning "homework" that involves Internet research or other relevant online activities completed either independently or in teams.

In addition to enriching the learning experience, incorporating technology into a soft skills curriculum plays right into what we know about how Millennials (those born after 1980) tend to learn best. Specifically, they:

- Like to be in control of their own learning.

- Insist on receiving information "on-demand."

- Expect learning to be directly relevant to their jobs and lives.

- Prefer to draw their own conclusions through trial-and-error rather than being "told."

- Are adept at constructing their own unique learning models as they gather information and tools from a variety of seemingly unrelated sources.

- Enjoy both visual and auditory input, and prefer to receive information in more engaging ways than reading alone provides.

- Multi-task well.

- Have short attention spans and expect immediate feedback and instant gratification.

- View collaboration and sharing as a means of validating their own knowledge, thoughts, and feelings.

And for those students who don't fit the above profile, combining classroom- and technology-delivered training offers another important benefit: increasing their comfort

and proficiency with computers. With the unskilled labor market quickly becoming obsolete, basic technology literacy is more important than ever.

Use of Technology Enhances Universal Design Capabilities

Universal Instructional Design means that a variety of abilities, disabilities, and language issues have been taken into account during the development of a curriculum or activity to ensure that it is accessible and useable by all learners. This is ideally done during the creation of the original product rather than subsequently attempting to adapt those created for the average user. When this is not possible, the universal design capabilities of existing course work can be extended through a variety of assistive technologies and tools increasingly available on the Internet and through computer hardware and software. Below are some practical suggestions for bringing universal design features to existing curriculum and instructional resources:

- Use a photocopy machine to enlarge handouts or use word processing software to increase font size.

- Use less text on each page, and more "white space" around the text to help learners focus.

- Provide participants with electronic versions of handouts to allow learners to use whatever assistive technology they have available to them.

- Provide a Braille copy of handouts and activity sheets.

- Use word- or sentence-reading technology such as a screen reader or JAWS if available.

- Convert documents into PDF in order to access PDF reader features.

- Use icons or pictures to support and extend written communication.

- Use multi-media presentations to supplement and reinforce instruction.

- Use translation tools, such as http://www.babblefish.com/freetranslation.php or http://translate.google.com/?hl=en&tab=wT# to provide information in other languages.

Connection Is Key

Approaching the course material in complementary ways promotes sustained learning. Because soft skills relate to an individual's ability to self-manage and interact appropriately with others, the classroom plays a vital role in imparting knowledge and building skills in these areas. Technology, when used appropriately, can be an effective tool in supporting this process. It's very important that the students see each aspect of the curriculum, regardless of how they experience it, as part of an integrated whole.

Seamless linkages should exist between the classroom activities, technology-based learning and exercises, and any other independent work that is assigned.

Incorporating technology into a soft skills curriculum will enable instructors to devote their limited face-to-face time with students to social and collaborative activities. Training sessions can be centered around case studies, role plays, class debate, and small group discussions rather than the one-directional transmission of information that tends to dominate classroom training. The communication exchanges between the instructor and students, and amongst the students themselves, will be more purposeful and beneficial.

Most of today's students probably routinely shift between the virtual worlds of computer games and PDAs and the physical environments of school and the mall, so this new integrated learning model will require little or no adjustment on their part. A technology-enhanced classroom will transform the *instructor's* role, however, from "teacher" to "facilitator." The objective is to guide students toward autonomous learning rather than providing all of the content directly to them. There is no better way to prepare students for the world of work than to help them help themselves!