

# Chapter XIX

## Building Online Training Programs for Virtual Workplaces

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### ABSTRACT

*Companies that conduct their business either in an entirely online setting or in hybrid environments (i.e., online and face-to-face) are in a unique position in today's global economy. They are poised to take advantage of the Internet's flexibility both for assisting their clients and for hiring the best workers available regardless of geographical location. They also are in a unique position when it comes to training and preparing their workers to assist those clients. However, many such companies do not have principle-centered training materials that they can adapt to meet their own institutional needs. This chapter provides employers with such training principles, ones that have been substantiated by practice and research from various professional fields and that have been successfully used in an Internet-based business that employs hundreds of part- and full-time individuals. Specifically, this chapter provides readers with: (1) an educational and financial rationale for conducting online human adaptive training for virtual workplaces; (2) an understanding of training/professional development principles and strategies for online employees in virtual businesses via one-to-one and/or group human adaptive settings, and (3) an understanding of how to scale such training processes efficiently and with measurable results gleaned from qualitative and quantitative methods.*

### INTRODUCTION

Companies that either conduct their business in an entirely online setting or in hybrid environments (i.e., online and face-to-face) are in a unique position in today's global economy. They are poised

to take advantage of the Internet's flexibility both for assisting their clients and for hiring the best workers available regardless of geographical location. They also are in a unique position when it comes to training and preparing their workers to assist those clients. However, many

such companies do not have principle-centered training materials that they can adapt to meet their own institutional needs.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide employers with such training principles, ones that have been substantiated by practice and research from various professional fields and that have been successfully used in an Internet-based business that employs hundreds of part- and full-time individuals. Specifically, this chapter provides readers with: (1) an educational and financial rationale for conducting online human adaptive training for virtual workplaces; (2) an understanding of training/professional development principles and strategies for online employees in virtual businesses via one-to-one and/or group human adaptive settings, and (3) an understanding of how to scale such training processes efficiently and with measurable results gleaned from qualitative and quantitative methods.

Although little is written about training employees virtually for virtual work settings, much is written about “e-training” for professional development purposes when “blended” employee teams work remotely *and* face-to-face. Schank (2002), for example, proposes solutions for such business training initiatives and education settings. However, his solutions primarily entail the incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI) into training situations: trainees complete scenarios of various, but generally have low, human interactivity levels (e.g., Aldrich, 2004; Schank, 2005). From practical, financial, and principled perspectives, AI can be appropriate for certain workplace and training circumstances. However, there are numerous situations for which *humans* need to conduct some or all online training interactively with employees who already do or who will work online. Particularly for businesses that involve high-touch, in-depth, consultative client relationships, training methodologies often need to account for human interactions that cannot necessarily be achieved by AI simulations.

Beyond AI, some have addressed human e-learning and training in online educational contexts through adult learning principles (e.g., Salmon, 2002; Hewett & Ehmann, 2004; Cargile Cook & Grant-Davie, 2005; Graves & Twigg, 2006; Hewett & Ehmann Powers, 2007). More work is needed, however, that addresses how such principles and others can be applied to training situations that yield effective, efficient, and scaleable results for virtual workplaces. In their book devoted solely to online training, *Advanced Web-Based Training Strategies: Unlocking Instructionally Sound Online Learning*, Driscoll and Carliner (2005) also emphasized the need for continued scholarship in this area.

This chapter, therefore, addresses three primary issues. First, it provides readers with an educational and financial rationale for conducting online human-adaptive training for virtual workplaces. Second, it considers training/professional development principles and strategies for online employees in virtual businesses via one-to-one and/or group human-adaptive settings. Finally, within this framework, it discusses how to scale such training processes efficiently and with measurable results gleaned from qualitative and quantitative methods. For the purposes of this chapter, we focus on online training with specific regard to workplaces that require employees to conduct *all* work with co-workers, colleagues, and supervisors online and at a distance. However, the principle-based e-training that we outline certainly can be valuable for those who interact with employees and clients in blended settings.

This chapter draws on our experiences with Smarthinking, Inc.<sup>1</sup>, a business built on the premise of aggregating geographically diverse employees for a 24-7 academic support service. Highlighting design and implementation principles, the chapter focuses on four areas:

- **A Background for Online Training.** The chapter begins with a review of the relevant literature and puts online training in context

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