National Association of State Chief Information Officers (NASCIO)
2003 Recognition Award Nomination

Title of Nomination: e-TRAIN: A Training Solution for Government Employees

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Category for Judging: Digital Government: Government to Government (G to G)

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Executive Summary

The challenge is the same whether it is state and local government or corporate America. The downturn in the economy has created a critical shortage of funding for many key business areas. Facing severe budget cuts, many government agencies have eliminated all discretionary spending yet are expected to provide service to customers (citizens) at levels equal to or greater than ever before. Technology solutions, particularly Web-based solutions, can be a partial answer but the resources to support these initiatives require training to remain current with present technology. Generally, travel and training are the first line items in the budget to be reduced.

One approach to this challenge is to provide training only in areas where there is a critical skill deficiency. While certainly an option, this tends to create dissatisfaction among the remainder of the staff. Employee satisfaction is driven by several factors, including access to professional development and the ability to stay current with emerging technologies. A more reasonable approach is to be in a position to offer training to all employees at a substantially reduced cost. Eliminating travel costs and finding affordable training appears to be the logical option.

A task force consisting of the Office of High Performance Government; the State Personnel Department, the organization responsible for providing business and interpersonal training; and the Division of Information Technology (DoIT), the organization responsible for providing information technology (IT) professional and end-user training services, was formed to address state training needs. The task force determined that there were three significant barriers to providing training state workers: 1) severe budget constraints, 2) difficulty in taking time away from day-to-day responsibilities, and 3) travel time for those not located in the state capital, where classes were offered.

e-Learning was identified as a tool that could reduce or eliminate these barriers. It was less expensive, modular in design, and ubiquitous in nature. Additionally, it could be used to deliver training to other government entities such as municipal and county governments, which seldom can take advantage of volume discounts due to their relatively small size.

The task force identified four categories of training needed: Information Technology Professional (IT), Personal Computer (PC) end-user, Softskills (SS), and Human Resource/Interpersonal Development (HR). As a result of a broad solicitation, two vendors were awarded contracts to provide the training: NETg for the IT Professional training and SmartForce (recently acquired by Skillsoft) for the PC, SS, and HR training. The DoIT product became known as e-TRAIN and has been operational since October 2001. State employees are able to access the training from their workspace, their home, a library, a hotel room, a remote office or our training lab–anywhere they have a personal computer and an Internet connection.

Description of project, including length of time in operation:

Business driver: Employee satisfaction and career progression is a function of many variables, including access to professional development and technology currency. Budget reductions have created a hiring freeze and forced agencies to utilize current staff to accomplish new tasks. At the same time, customers are demanding enhanced service from the same agencies.   However, many agency staffers do not have the skills to perform according to the elevated expectations. Extensive off-site training is not feasible. This is particularly true in the IT arena, where employees fear becoming technologically obsolete and of little value to their organization.

Objective: Identify the barriers to technical and professional development training. Recommend and implement a strategy to reduce and/or eliminate the barriers.

Findings:

1) **Training is expensive.**   IT training does not come with a small price tag. The more scarce the resource, the greater the demand to train and develop existing resources. The increasing demand for technical training continues to drive up the cost.   The going rate for instructor-led training (ILT) can be as high as $500 per day. Given budget cuts, this type of training is often viewed as an exorbitant expense. Although somewhat less expensive, PC and interpersonal training are often considered to be non-essential.

2) **Extended periods out of the office are prohibitive.** Training must be integrated into the workday in an efficient way. Today's students need to be able to acquire smaller segments of learning with the ability to apply what is learned immediately. Most IT classes are five days in length and cover a large amount of material, often more than the employee can absorb at one time. Generally these are the very individuals who are needed on a daily basis to maintain the technical environment.

3) **Many state employees live far from training centers.** More than 75 percent of state employees work outside of the main campus and in areas where there is little, if any, instructor-led training. Travel expense is one of the first line items to be eliminated from a constrained budget.   Often the expense of traveling to the training site exceeds the cost of the class.

Recommendation:

Implement e-Learning as an alternative to instructor-led training (ILT). This technology has proven to be effective, low-cost, and ubiquitous. It requires only a PC and an Internet connection and offers a wider variety of standardized curricula. This product is called e-TRAIN. Continue to provide instructor-led training until adoption rates for e-TRAIN warrant elimination of this traditional method of providing professional development or until the ILT becomes cost-prohibitive to offer and support.

Justification:

e-TRAIN is less expensive than instructor-led training. It is modular in nature, allowing the employee to complete small chunks of training as time allows. It has the additional benefit of being "just-in-time", allowing the student to access a module with application to the work at hand, get the training at the moment it is needed, and return to the task armed to successfully execute it. e-TRAIN courses are hosted by the vendors on their servers and accessed via a Web browser, requiring little on-site technical support. The training is available anytime and anywhere, eliminating the need for travel to the main or regional training centers.

Steps to implementation:

1) Learn as much as possible about e-Learning from successful implementations in other organizations and determine potential adoption rates for different types of training. IT professionals become readily acclimated to e-Learning as compared to students who seldom use a computer and might require an interpersonal development course. Define success criteria for each type of training to be offered.

2) Develop partnerships with other training entities within the organization if training is dispersed. Together define standardized course requirements.

3) Develop RFP. Seek proposals that provide several options such as graduated volume discounts, flexibility, minimal up-front costs, some custom development, and vendors with a good track record.

4) Evaluate and award. Contract with winning vendor(s).

5) Develop pricing on a per student basis to be recovered from the agencies if charge back is the normal business model.

6) Brand the product and develop the marketing plan. Sell. Sell. Sell.

Status:

The State of Indiana entered into contracts with two vendors: NETg for the IT Professional training and SmartForce (now part of Skillsoft) for end-user PC training, business skills development, and human resource/interpersonal training. The vendors assisted extensively with implementation. e-TRAIN was rolled out to state government in October 2001. The pricing model is based on a one-year subscription. Pricing per student, including administrative overhead, was set as follows: $500 for the entire IT library of 110 courses; $100 for the entire PC library of 60 courses; $50 for the Business Library of 70 courses; and $50 for the HR library of 30 courses. A package deal at a reduced rate was also offered.

Significance to the improvement of the operation of government:

Desired objective:

State government historically has had a difficult time retaining skilled resources. Most technical workers feel the pressure of maintaining current technical skills while looking for benefits far beyond the present. They look for opportunities to acquire new skills, both for the current job function and future possibilities, and to be able to steer their own careers. When budgets are severely reduced, often the training is simply not affordable.

Solution:

Through a training survey conducted in 1999, employees indicated a significant need for additional technical training. Identifying training needs for state workers and finding a cost-effective way to provide training to the entire population of state government workers, regardless of their location, was a challenge. e-TRAIN was the solution that most universally met the needs. Most state employees can access the Internet, whether in the office, at home, or at a community facility. This offering made training available to virtually every employee.

Expectations:

- Training will be significantly cost-effective.

- Travel associated with training will be reduced or eliminated.

- More individuals will be able to receive training within allocated budgets.

- Employees will hold the key to their own growth and potential.

- Employee satisfaction will increase due to ability to acquire new skills easily.

- Training will be available to 75% - 90% of employees rather than 25% - 30%.

- Learning will be integrated into the work environment, not time away from it.

- e-TRAIN can become a training vehicle for all government workers in Indiana.

Operation prior to implementation of e-TRAIN:

State employees had instructor-led training (ILT) for IT available to them through contracts with local vendors. PC end-user training was available through DoIT's Computer Learning Center on a fee basis. Softskills and Human Resource training were offered by the State Personnel Department, usually at no cost to the student. This training was limited by frequency and convenience.

New paradigm:

e-TRAIN will represent significant savings over ILT classroom training, projected to be as much as 50 to 80 percent, particularly with respect to IT professional training. Students acclimated to PCs will adapt readily to learning objects and simulations accessible via the World Wide Web. The demand for end-user training has become sporadic and difficult to support via ILT.

Softskills courses for professional development, although not generally a high priority, will be easily accessible and can be used for individual or group training. The small fee charged for the e-TRAIN business and interpersonal libraries makes it very attractive. e-Learning makes it possible to deliver consistent training to all employees.

Resulting operation since the implementation of e-TRAIN:

Instructor-led training (ILT) for IT professionals and PC end-users is available to state employees at a discount through contracts with local vendors. DoIT has downsized the internal training function by eliminating on-site PC training, three state-of-the-art classrooms, and the staff required to support the on-site training. The expense of supporting these functions has been reduced by $200,000 annually. Softskills and HR training continues to be offered by the State Personnel Department, usually at no cost to the student.   This tends to compete with e-TRAIN business and interpersonal training, which are fee-based.

Lessons learned:

- Start with a single vendor. Two vendors double the implementation efforts, which is difficult when staff is limited. Take advantage of the vendor expertise in marketing.

- Borrow best practices from other states that have successful implementations.

- Plan to meet adoption rate goal within three to five years.

- It does not matter how low the cost is if there is no money for training.

- Keep up-front payments to vendors at a minimum until you gain some experience.

- Get a strong sponsor for your program. Mandates don't hurt either.

- Make sure you know how to interest your audience in your product.

- Plan. Plan. Plan. Sell. Sell. Sell.

Future objectives:

- Increase the adoption rate and awareness of e-TRAIN.

- Develop tailored courses to address large-scale training needs such as new employee orientation, benefit plans, or application training in areas with high turnover.

Benefits realized by service recipients, taxpayers, agency or state:

- **Ubiquity**. State employees can access training from their workspace, a dedicated classroom, their home, a library, a hotel room, or a remote office 24 X 7.

- **Manageability.** The course libraries are managed by the vendors and housed on the vendors' servers, and redundancy is built in to provide continuous access.

- **Flexibility.** Both vendors not only offer full training courses and certification curriculums but, more importantly, topical learning objects to foster "just-in-time" training when an employee needs additional help while performing his/her job functions.

- **Availability.** State workers who cannot travel to a training site now have the opportunity to train on their desktops. e-TRAIN allows them to segment their training into manageable pieces so they can continue to perform their job functions and take a small chunk of time for training on a regular basis. e-TRAIN accommodates just about any work schedule.

- **Affordability.** For a nominal subscription fee, students have access to all courses within a given library as many times as they wish to take them. The subscriptions provide a savings of 30% - 80% over current single-course pricing for ILT.

- **Correctly Targeted Training:** e-TRAIN includes pre- and post-assessments to determine what courses are necessary for the student. The pre-assessment eliminates the need for taking a course when the student has already mastered the material. The post-assessment provides a way to track the student's learning performance.

- **Improved Employee Retention.** e-TRAIN provides a non-threatening environment for workers to "spread their wings" to determine if another area of interest might be a more suitable match. Employees should be encouraged to enhance their value in their current job and to open up possibilities for career advancement.

- **Improved Customer Focus.** Employees who are better trained and derive satisfaction from what they are learning and doing will relate in a more positive way to the citizens of Indiana.

Return on Investment, short-term/long-term payback (including summary calculations):

e-TRAIN serves as a very cost-effective alternative to traditional training methods, particularly for IT professionals. The return on investment for technical training was very positive after the first complete year of the program. For every dollar spent on IT training through e-TRAIN, $1.62 was saved by not attending ILT. With this type of return on investment, more employees can be offered the opportunity to remain current in their technical skills. Even with tight budgets, e-TRAIN is affordable.

The vendor contracts are for two years. At this point, we are only half way through the second year. It should be noted that the demand for PC end-user training is dropping significantly, even with local ILT sites. The number of e-TRAIN subscriptions for the first year was lower than expected and cost recovery was at 50 percent. The business skills and interpersonal libraries were extremely underutilized. Cost recovery was minimal. This was either due to the fact that our expectations were too high or budget cuts eliminated this training. Subscription fees are recovered from the agencies that purchase through an interdepartmental billing mechanism.

Indiana has made a sizeable investment in its employees.   It costs far less to retain a good employee than to recruit and train a new one. e-TRAIN affords many exciting avenues to learn, to grow, to be fiscally responsible, to show interest in our workforce, to be innovative, and to continue to invest in the Indiana workers of tomorrow.   e-Learning is the way of the future.