

Distance Learning May Be Best Way To Train MFI Staff

by Leslie Zucker, Vice President of echange LLC

In an industry like microfinance, where distances between branches can be great, transportation slow and staff time overloaded, trying to train staff through traditional, face-to-face workshops can be both expensive and ineffective. One microfinance institution (MFI) in Bolivia spends US\$20,000 annually to provide 48 face-to-face workshops for 165 employees: a cost of \$178 per person and quite a significant investment in training, by microfinance industry standards. But the MFI's management has been disappointed with the results. Though post-workshop assessments have shown the participants do gain new knowledge, evaluations a year later show the knowledge was not applied as successfully as management had expected.

"It looks like we are spending our time, effort and money on a lot of low-quality trainings," according to the MFI's executive director.

The problem is that effective training must do more than give staff new knowledge. It is another challenge altogether to improve performance across an institution by ensuring that staff can apply what they learn. High-quality results require continuous follow-up and support for the application of new learning in the workplace.

Fortunately, new and powerful "distance-learning" technologies offer great advances in training for performance results. Distance-learning methodologies offer a range of advantages, including the chance for trainees to select the pace and mode of learning that suits them best; the opportunity for ongoing interaction among participants and facilitators; a cost-effective mode for monitoring progress, assessing achievement and supporting the application of new knowledge to actual workplace performance; and, often, considerable cost savings.

Distance-Learning Technology Enables Better Focus on Performance Results

While face-to-face training requires a costly physical presence, facilitators using distance-learning technology can promote learning and inspire action from wherever there is a computer. The advantages go beyond simple cost savings. Facilitators can use e-mail, CD Rom, Intranet or Internet to encourage staff to share information and experiences in the often-difficult process of applying new knowledge while at work.

Getting people together physically in the same place for a few days can have its merits. It can be a good time to start talking about performance. It can help inspire teamwork, build rapport and set expectations. But it may not be the best way to get results. The propensity to apply new knowledge decays rapidly over time. Only training that incorporates follow-up assessments and performance-monitoring meets these challenges.

Participants must get the clear message that their performance, the results they produce, matter. They must understand the connection between their training and the results that are expected of them. They must believe they will be supported by facilitators and supervisors in applying their new knowledge, and they must know how and when their performance and results will be reviewed and rewarded. All these key facets of truly effective training can be offered efficiently and effectively in a well-designed distance-learning program.

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Distance-Learning Technologies Enhance Training Design

The design of a high-quality distance-learning initiative revolves around four key elements:

- excellent instructional content that makes use of interactive multimedia tools;
- methods for building community among participants and facilitators and interaction between them and the technology they are using;
- monitoring measures of attendance, participation and progress; and
- integration of consistent follow-up.

The best practice for developing relevant, high-quality instructional content requires involving participants in the design process. The reactions of participants to training content can give an indication of whether the content is clear and helpful and the activities engaging and relevant. Once it is determined that the content passes these criteria, whether in a face-to-face setting or in the form of a static document, then multimedia tools can be used to enhance the content's presentation.

Building interaction among the participants, facilitators and technology requires forethought and planning. Years of evidence have demonstrated that it is an unsuccessful approach simply to put a course online by posting documents on the web. Reading online is tiring and rarely inspires action.

Well-designed distance-learning technology therefore presents material both in visual format and in audio format to accommodate different learning styles. One way to hold a participant's interest is to build in call-and-response features. Participants thus have the means to check how they have absorbed materials by answering questions. An audio or visual "narrator" then responds and gives immediate feedback. Moreover, online technologies allow participants to share experiences with their peers, either in real time, using chat sessions, or whenever they are online.

Monitoring attendance and participation and measuring progress are also key elements of distance-learning technologies. In the online environment, facilitators, training designers and human resource staff can gain incredible insight into the successes and challenges of the workplace. Through a "learning management system," it is possible to know if some participants are not attending regularly scheduled online meetings. With this information, trainers can address the problem. It may be that certain supervisors, intentionally or unintentionally, are not supporting the on-the-job learning process. Likewise, participants that are particularly engaged, eager and competent can be identified and may be rewarded or even promoted. They may also be asked to help mentor their colleagues.

Technology Enables Follow-Up and Personalized Facilitation

Well-designed distance-learning initiatives are dynamic and adaptable and include the consistent follow-up that is so key to improving performance. Follow-up may be as simple as a monthly email reminder or as complex as a weekly coaching session.

To be effective, follow-up should be as personalized as possible. A message like "Attention! Homework is due tomorrow!" would be far less effective than: "Hi Mary. Last week we discussed the issue of "customer service" in your branch. Have you had a chance to talk to your staff about their perceptions of customer service?" This way the participant understands that his or her performance is important and is being noticed.

Designing a distance-learning initiative that is interactive, monitors attendance, participation and progress and includes follow-up, requires the involvement of a few different kinds of experts. An expert on training content, alone, is not enough. Collaboration is needed among a content expert, a facilitator, an instructional designer and a technologist.

A good distance-learning facilitator has rapport with participants, facilitates learning without preaching and does not fear technology. A good instructional designer will follow best practices of curriculum development, such as "ADDIE" (Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement and Evaluate) and models of experiential learning ("What?" "So What?" and "Now What?"). And someone who is good with technology will be able to prepare the technology environment of the institution to ensure that it is user-friendly for participants.

Distance Learning is Adaptable to Different Technology Environments

Delivery technology refers to the way in which knowledge is imparted, such as through CD Rom, Internet or a "blended" approach which combines face-to-face training with one or more distance-learning delivery technologies. In the short- to medium-term, the Internet will be the dominant delivery technology, especially where high-speed connectivity is available. A delivery mechanism called a "Learning Management System" delivers courses to participants and keeps track of attendance, participation, progress and grades.

There are dozens of Learning Management Systems in the marketplace, ranging from the very simple, such as WebCT (used widely by colleges and universities), to somewhat more complex programs, such as IntraLearn, and very complex technology, such as Oracle or DOCENT. Choosing the right application is critical. There are sufficient choices in the market to find one that fits all of a given MFI's needs, leaving management free to concentrate on designing a great distance-learning initiative.

Return on Investment in Training

The shortcomings of the extensive training effort made by the Bolivian microfinance institution described above may have had less to do with low-quality training content than with inadequate focus on performance and follow-up support. The initial investment in the institution's training program was a good start, but the full potential of that investment was not reached. Using distance-learning technologies as part of a well-designed training initiative, the institution could improve the satisfaction of

Don't Do It Yourself

Despite many institutions' desire to own and manage their information systems in-house, building a Learning Management System is not a smart decision. It requires a heavy investment of time, resources and staff to build, operate and maintain such systems. "This diverts attention and valuable resources from the institution's core business," says Camilo Gallyas, Founder of Konocimiento Gestión y Aprendizaje, S.A., Latin America's leading eLearning company.

The best choice is to lease one of the many user-friendly and accessible Learning Management Systems and let the technology do the work. Given that many microfinance institutions are now online, distance-learning technologies do not require much additional investment in hardware or software. In fact, they offer a great opportunity to maximize the investment already made in Internet connectivity.

its staff, enhance on-the-job performance and maximize its return on investment in training.

Certainly, technology itself is only a means to an end. It is never a solution in and of itself. Positive results depend on many factors, including good planning, capable people and individual effort. But distance learning technologies offer excellent opportunities for spreading knowledge and skills among greater numbers of staff at microfinance institutions, at lower cost and with training components that help ensure performance results.

Leslie Zucker is Vice President of echange, LLC is a Washington, DC-based change- management, technology and training-management consulting firm. It is managing a project funded by the Inter-American Development Bank, called "Harnessing the Power of Technology to Train Microfinance and Microenterprise Organizations," which focuses on the use of distance-learning technologies to facilitate learning and improved performance in the workplace. Through this project, echange is producing an online course on customer service for branch managers of microfinance institutions. The program will be available in English and Spanish by mid-2004.

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Marc de Sousa-Shields, Enterprising Solutions – mdess@esglobal.com or Leslie Zucker, echange – lzucker@globalechange.com