A learning experience

If organisations give their staff detailed training and a consistent learning experience it can have a favourable impact on profits. Glynn Davis explores the effect e-learning is having on the retail sector.

You would think the proliferation of the internet and the adoption of broadband would provide the ideal platform for e-learning to become more widespread within the retail sector. This is not necessarily the case – chiefly because of the perceived costs of the technology, which is unfortunate because e-learning would certainly overcome the key difficulties of retail training: a disparate and lowly-ranked workforce located at stores around the country.

However, cost is not the only issue as there is also the problem of a lack of PCs in most stores. And when one is available then it will often have nothing more powerful than a 64k internet connection. This is a result of the general difficulty retailers have in securing a suitable service level agreement for DSL (Digital Subscriber Line) capability from their service provider.

Phil Dodds, sales director at online training specialist Atrium, which recently merged with traditional training company GBS, says that even the likes of technology retailer Vodafone does not have the necessary bandwidth coming into its stores for it to send down video training.

Like many retailers it has therefore continued to rely on distributing paper-based training materials to its stores, which are then disseminated ad hoc by managers to the store staff.

A fine blend

While many retailers remain content to use these established methods, there are a growing number that are starting to at least explore using e-learning as part of their training. This trend for ‘blended’ learning – whereby the techniques of traditional classroom-based training are combined with PC-based e-learning methods – is growing and helped prompt the merger of Atrium and GBS.

As a software company Atrium had focused on functionality but since the merger with GBS we’ve looked at the learning process and we now know better about what to deliver online and what not to deliver online,” explains Dodds.

The integration of the two methods has resulted in the merged company trying to use some of the classroom processes as content in its e-learning packages (based on its VC Contact platform) while also setting up forums and online testing that can be used both before and after its classroom-based training.

While such developments will undoubtedly help e-learning to be more widely adopted by retailers there is still the issue of how to deliver it to retailers’ stores. One solution Vodafone has been looking into is downloading its training/communication materials (about its new handsets) onto its in-store kiosks that are used by customers during trading-hours.

Screening success

Another alternative is to use satellite communication to deliver training materials to PCs and to TV screens at stores. For those merchants that have in-store TV systems in place then the cost effectiveness of a satellite communication solution is obvious. However, Simon Cockayne, retail business development executive at Hughes, says such systems can also make financial sense for retailers with as few as 50 to 100 outlets.

Asda uses just such a solution. It has a large TV hooked up to a media player (in the staff area) at each of its stores, which is then linked to the satellite. This delivers the training materials. “It’s a high speed link and since every video going to the stores is the same there is only one broadcast necessary,” he says.

Since each one of these videos is stored on the players’ hard drive, each store accumulates a library of training and informational material to be utilised by the retailers’ trainers for group communications as well as by individuals looking for personalised training.

Along with using such systems to deliver training materials on issues such as health and safety and induction courses for new staff, Cockayne says they can also help retailers to get across better customer service messaging and to improve staff briefings on new products and in-store initiatives that are to be promoted.

These merchandising briefings can be used to directly impact sales. Asda used its e-learning technology to brief staff on its jewellery ranges, which resulted in the company posting an impressive 40 per cent uplift in this category. This serious benefit to the top-line can undoubtedly be used by retailers to justify the initial investment in introducing an e-learning infrastructure.

Another benefit of e-learning systems over traditional training methods is the ability to better monitor which employees have watched specific briefings/training packages at each store. Like most e-learning companies Atrium uses a Learning Management System (LMS) for this purpose. LMS’ manage individual employee training records in order that retailers can monitor whether employees have completed courses. For the likes of essential health and safety training the LMS can provide proof that the necessary training has been completed by each employee. And where the testing of employees on their training has been undertaken the performances can be monitored. This could be used to compare scores on a store-by-store basis.
With retailers accessing information in the LMS through a PC with an internet browser, Columcille Gibson, learning resources business manager at Video Arts – whose clients include John Lewis, Waitrose and the major supermarkets – says it is clear how big a difference the web has made to the way e-learning has advanced.

Even though Video Arts built its reputation on the quality of the content in its training videos (which have typically been delivered by skilled trainers in the classroom environment) it can now provide its clients with access to an internet portal as part of its mix of solutions. This has meant that on top of its extensive library of course-in-a-box training (comprising DVDs, associated notes and PowerPoint presentations) the company is building an e-learning library. This currently contains 32 courses and is growing.

Gibson says these courses comprise 30-second ‘chunks’ of video interspersed with a list of options that enable the employee to interactively decide what happens next. He suggests they are especially useful for employees that have missed a classroom-based course and for store managers who might not want to take part in a course with the rest of the shop floor employees.

Although it is still relatively early days for Video Arts and its e-learning activities Gibson revealed that the company has already been considering how it can further utilise new technologies to improve its blend of traditional training methods and e-learning capabilities.

It has done some work using Dell PDA’s, whereby 30-second video versions of ‘reminder cards’ are delivered to employees when they have finished a course, and is considering using Sony PSPs as devices to deliver short training videos to staff.

With technology continuing to advance and training recognised as a key method of improving customer service in-store then maybe it is inevitable that the retail industry will start to embrace e-learning with greater gusto than it has done to date.