

The e-learning process

The increased burden on retailers to provide their employees with a whole host of mandatory training relating to health and safety and compliance issues has led many to investigate e-learning technology as it can be extremely cost-effective compared with traditional classroom-based training. Glynn Davis reports

BP Retail was among the many retailers finding the cost of providing training to its employees increasingly onerous, as legislation demanded ever-greater levels of training for its 5,000 staff located in 250 company-owned forecourts. Richard Marshall, account director at ThirdForce, says: "BP needed a training management system that was (effectively) an audit that it could show on-site to the police, health and safety executive and environmental health that courses had been done. They wanted it delivered on-site to reduce the time off-site by staff."

The solution was to use the ThirdForce 'el-box' that consists of a portable touch-screen tablet PC that is pre-loaded with dedicated e-learning training modules. So successful was a pilot in a single store of 20 people – with the on-site training reducing the need for staff cover and eradicating travel and subsistence costs as well as being twice as quick as the old method – that a roll-out was swiftly undertaken to all its forecourts.

Whereas previously it cost approximately £100 per head per course, with the tablet PCs this has been reduced to around only £10. In order for BP management to keep track of who has been accredited with which courses, all the PCs are synchronised daily with head office's central system. "The PCs are plugged into the phone line and all the data is synchronised so BP (management) knows the situation in each store. This feeds into the payroll to ensure all employees are held on the system," explains Marshall.

This is an ideal solution for BP because it has no need for any two-way interactivity between its forecourts and head office, but for more complex e-learning activities two-way communication is a necessity. This is the case with Vision Express where

the optometrists spread across its 200 stores need constant training as part of their jobs. For its e-learning requirements it uses the Retail Manager solution from Triangle Group, which it installed as part of a grand plan to upgrade its entire communication systems between head office and its store network.

This is a web-based solution that utilises the broadband that goes into each Vision Express store and enables the company to provide two-way visibility between head office and stores. Nick Wadsley, business development manager at Triangle Group, says the e-learning requirement of Vision Express effectively "piggybacks" on the existing components of the Retail Manager solution. One of its key advantages is that individual employees can log-on with unique passwords and access specific training components. Individuals' training schedules can be monitored easily by being held centrally and employees can be offered courses relevant to their position and progress within the company.

When signing up to a course it can be signed-off within the system by their supervisor. And when undertaking a test over the channel the results can

be linked to their pay grade. Wadsley says: "It is real cradle-to-the-grave training." The ability for people to log-on individually and access training relevant only to them differentiates this solution from an intranet, according to Wadsley, who says: "An intranet is a billboard where individuals have to look for relevant content but with our database we can ensure that only relevant information is sent to an individual."

Sally Taylor, head of training at BT Expedite, suggests that another downside of an intranet in many retail organisations is they are typically only accessible to store managers via a PC in-store



– often held in the back-office. This can be a problem for many retailers especially as many stores only have a single PC. To solve this problem Taylor says BT Expedite developed the Virtual View & Learn (VVL) web-based e-learning tool that comprises two elements – enabling training to be run on EPoS devices as well as on PCs.

“There are a lot of regulations coming in and there is a need for a levelling of training across a retail business and this solution suits all store staff at all levels,” she says. E-learning development company, Copia, has also found this to be a problem so its PoSAssist solution enables e-learning to be undertaken on touch-screen EPoS devices rather than just on PCs.

Although BT’s VVL product can be run over broadband, with the modules accessed online from a PC, Taylor says the training modules can also be polled overnight to the stores’ tills – either from a central server or from servers located in each store. WH Smith uses the latter while Mothercare the former.

Added benefits

As well as being cost efficient, Taylor says that delivering training to the tills

achieves a ‘pick-up’ rate by staff that is 30 per cent better than if delivered to a PC. This is undoubtedly helped by the fact that when they log-on they get to see “their version of VVL” that is relevant to them and their specific training requirements.

Meanwhile, as well as using the solution for training on health and safety and for induction information, JJB is using it as a tool to educate staff about its latest products and promotions. In addition to allowing them to easily look up information as a form of training during any breaks from serving customers they can also access the information while serving, which could help them to up-sell or cross-sell products.

Bala Subramanian, head of retail in Europe for Zensar Technologies, says finding such added benefits from e-learning solutions can be crucial in the decision-making

process of retailers. It could be the deciding factor in them implementing an e-learning technology platform.

Although there has been a failure by many retailers to invest in any such solutions things are changing, according to Subramanian, who says: “Although more retailers still only use traditional training methods the larger ones have implemented (e-learning) platforms and we see a trend for more of them (to be installed) in the future.”

Only then will retailers be able to fully defend themselves against the onslaught of compliance and new legislation that is making mandatory training an increasingly time-consuming and costly part of doing business in the sector.

