

Why Corrections Should Clear the Hurdles

By Ben Stevenson and
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E-learning, or distance education, has been around for many years; are correctional administrators and their employees taking advantage of the opportunities? With the rapid emergence of new teaching technologies, correctional trainers and administrators should be aware of the myriad e-learning training opportunities available to agencies.

In simple terms, e-learning is the use of Internet technologies to deliver a broad array of solutions that enhance knowledge and performance. E-learning is not just about introducing new technology for learning; it is about a new way of thinking about learning.¹ In its infancy, virtual learning offerings were widely criticized for simply mimicking face-to-face classes. Organizations would take existing educational materials, add a few Web links and consider it “transferred” to an online environment.² Today, e-learning has evolved to allow customized, flexible, relevant and engaging training.

The most commonly used forms of e-learning are asynchronous learning, synchronous learning and co-blended learning solutions. Asynchronous learning is a student-centered teaching method that uses online learning resources to facilitate information-sharing among a network of people outside the constraints of time and place.³ Synchronous learning occurs when a learner and instructor are in the same place at the same time. Examples of synchronous learning would be live audio and video conferencing, chat sessions and shared whiteboards. A co-blended learning solution, or what is also called hybrid learning, is another approach designed to include the best features of a face-to-face and an online learning environment. With appropriate educational courseware, these types of learning formats allow students to learn and work independently from their instructors.

A NEW GENERATION of CORRECTIONAL Employees

Many young employees are technologically savvy and equipped with advanced computer skills. The next generation of correctional employees will have even further advanced computer and technology skills.

These individuals learn differently than individuals from past generations by exploring information, critically comparing and contrasting information, and using various technological mediums.

In addition to schools teaching computer skills at early ages, numerous online college programs are emerging throughout the U.S. For example, the Department of Education reported that during the 2000-2001 academic year, 56 percent of all two- and four-year degree-granting institutions offered distance education courses for students enrolled in college, adult education, and continuing and professional education.⁴ These figures demonstrate that a technology shift is changing the manner in which people learn.

With the emergence of the Internet, knowledge and information is forever growing and changing. Training hot topics, innovative workplace practices and emerging trends can be organized, accessed and presented to staff via the Internet. This enables correctional trainers to easily incorporate up-to-date local and national topics into training curriculums. Preparing and developing training modules can be a daunting task for a trainer who already has additional full-time job responsibilities. Therefore, the ability to quickly organize and process information would be an asset for training development.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS

E-learning should run parallel to a knowledge management system that helps reinforce a training curriculum. In simple terms, a knowledge management system is a system or framework for managing an organization's processes that create, store and distribute knowledge, as defined by its collective data, information and body of experience.⁵ An e-learning platform combined with a knowledge management system will work in tandem to complement an organization's training department and overall communication.

An excellent example of a knowledge management system is the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS), which is funded by the Department of Justice. According to the NCJRS Web site (www.ncjrs.org), the service is a federally funded resource offering justice and substance abuse information to support research, policy and program development worldwide. The NCJRS knowledge management system can be developed on state and local levels to help correctional professionals develop training. Often local government agencies already have existing knowledge management systems that provide public information or are used for human resources. Correctional agencies may not realize it, but they can construct and design training knowledge management systems under these existing public platforms.

If federal, state and local correctional agencies create similar knowledge management systems for e-learning training, employees may develop a better understanding of their job responsibilities and the issues surrounding them. Such a system would provide support information about policies and procedures, forms and checklists, PowerPoint presentations, yearly requirements and training hour rosters, videos, schedules of classes, grade books that would enroll and track e-learning classes, and digital libraries for corrections-related articles.

COST SAVINGS AND PRACTICALITY

The emergence of new technologies and the growing need for more flexibility in scheduling seem to be driving the need for distance learning.⁶ Correctional agencies are required by either federal, state or local laws to have employees complete a minimum number of training hours each year. These mandated training hours ensure agencies are in legal compliance, while imparting employees with a knowledge base that helps them effectively perform their jobs. Yearly training requirements are often seen as a hassle or "coordination nightmare" because of the need to shift work schedules. Training requirements often involve mandating overtime, which can cost an agency thousands of dollars and may interrupt the daily operation of a facility. E-learning, on the other hand, can offer training at a fraction of the cost required to physically have individuals attend classroom training.

Because of programmatic design, e-learning is convenient for participants and can be completed during downtime. Individuals are able to access the programs in their primary work environments and, in most instances, can temporarily stop coursework and resume it at a later time, if a need arises.

Because of differences in the way adults learn and process information, e-learning can reach an audience that previously would have gone unmet. Imagine how these topics could reach a larger population without overtime costs. Imagine if employees could be taught or led by experts in the field from across the country.

Traditional yearly training topics such as CPR, defense tactics training, pepper spray, firearm qualification and cell extraction require the physical practical application of skills. It would not be beneficial to have e-learning substitute for this type of training. Such courses are better taught within a classroom setting to maintain stringent controls and to maximize individual proficiency.

A number of quality e-learning correctional training programs exist that may meet an agency's requirements for training hours. Training topics that easily transfer to an online format include:

- Ethics in corrections;
- Correctional supervision;
- Mental health and medical issues;
- Female offenders;
- Drug identification;
- Sexual harassment;
- Interpersonal communication skills; and
- Other soft-skill topics that would be agency specific.

CORRECTIONAL DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Several distance education and e-learning training programs are offered specifically for corrections professionals. These e-learning organizations offer both synchronous and asynchronous training modules that cover a variety of subjects to improve correctional workplace proficiency. In some cases, these training programs may be used for college credit or continuing education units.

The American Correctional Association provides training assistance for jails and prisons throughout the U.S. and

offers a full range of educational and training opportunities for adult correctional and juvenile justice staff, including a correctional certification program, an online corrections academy, a leadership development program, workshops, technical assistance, courses, and publications.

The National Institute of Corrections also offers correctional distance education training programs. It provides training, technical assistance, information services and policy/program development assistance to federal, state and local correctional agencies. NIC offers satellite video training, computer-based training and a wide variety of online programs. In addition, NIC's Web site and knowledge management system serve as excellent training resources with various articles, research and books readily available.

Both of these agencies have developed critical educational and training resources via distance education. As many correctional agencies are faced with budget cuts and restraints, NIC and ACA have forged ahead to develop cost-effective training outreach programs for both adult and juvenile corrections. They have also coordinated agreements with universities, so that their tested training modules may be used toward a college degree.

ONLINE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

The University of Maryland University College offers online bachelor's degrees for military, regional and international students in criminal justice. Students from around the world take work-related classes taught by criminal justice experts to further their educational goals and obtain credentials for promotion and professional development. A unique offering by the university's criminal justice department is an 18-credit certificate in correction administration to prepare working adult students for a demanding career in the corrections work environment.

The University of Maryland University College is one of many different universities that offer college degrees via the Internet. The pursuit of an online degree may not count toward in-service training, but it can provide correctional staff experience that applies in the work setting. In addition, many government employers offer employee assistance or technical job assistance programs that help pay for education and/or training.

A SHIFT IN CULTURE

Attitudes about e-learning differ at the individual level, but it is important for an organization to have a culture that promotes learning and training. An agency's motivation and attitude about e-learning may decide its success. And the key to successfully sustaining initiatives in technology-enhanced learning and distance education is the commitment and support of an organization's top leaders.⁷ As with any technological venture, organizations should initially expect technology errors, computer failures and poor attitudes. Occasional hiccups may be encountered when either the host or participating server goes down, as will happen on occasion. However, an agency will succeed in developing a strong e-learning program if it remains focused and committed to its initial objectives.

Without support from all areas of an agency, an e-learning initiative program will likely not succeed. There must be buy-in from agency heads, IT personnel and trainers. When switching from a noncomputer-based training format to any kind of e-learning, the concept of training enhancement must be at the forefront. If not, the idea of "the old way has always worked fine so why mess with it" will prevail. The key is to make sure the training delivery system is readily accessible and easy to use.

Before developing an e-learning training program, it is important that an agency create a detailed cost-analysis plan. An agency should identify yearly training objectives, the feasibility of transferring training from a face-to-face environment to an online environment, particular training preparation requirements, the evaluation of appropriate e-learning courseware, and the required technology and computer infrastructure support.

Computer-based training solutions have not yet been fully integrated into the public safety sector. Because of the traditional nature of the work involved in day-to-day correctional operations, training has often mimicked the work environment with its interactivity, which may be one reason e-learning faces opposition. However, as the technology advances and the training uses and benefits are realized, e-learning solutions will be widely embraced and, eventually, become the norm.

ENDNOTES

¹ Rosenberg, M. 2001. *E-learning: Strategies for delivering knowledge in the digital age*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

² Pollack, M. 2005. Class dismissed. *NetConnect Library Journal*, 15 Oct. Available at www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6269276.html.

³ Mayadas, F. 1997. Asynchronous learning networks: a Sloan Foundation perspective. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 1(1):1-16.

⁴ Waits, T. and L. Lewis. 2003. *Distance education at degree-granting postsecondary institutions: 2000-2001*. National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. Available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2003017>.

⁵ Bridgefield Group. 2006. Bridgefield Group ERP supply chain glossary. Available at <http://bridgefieldgroup.com/bridgefieldgroup/index.html>.

⁶ Hillstock, L. 2005. A few common misconceptions about e-learning. Paper presented at the 38th Association of Small Computer Users in Education (ASCUE), 12-16 June in Myrtle Beach, S.C.

⁷ Berge, Z.L. and D. Smith. 2000. Implementing corporate distance training using change management, strategic planning, and project management. In *Distance learning technologies: Issues, trends and opportunities*, ed. L. Lau, 39-51. Hershey, Pa.: Idea Group.

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