The Right Online Health and Safety Training Can Save School Districts Money

Some health and safety training approaches are becoming dated, given regulations, new technology, and financial pressure. It is inefficient to dispatch a trainer from the Twin Cities to a Greater Minnesota school to talk for two hours to perhaps only one or two employees about such issues as asbestos awareness, or lock out/tag out safety protocol. It can also be a management nightmare to get all employees from a specific department in one room for one special training program. Yet, federal regulation and some insurance guidelines increasingly mandate such documented training on health and safety issues. Fortunately, if carefully implemented, quality training can now be accomplished via electronic communication. "Carefully" is the key word.

Multimedia training modules that incorporate text, audio and streaming video clips – many of which can be customized to the individual district – can better protect and reduce hassle. Where this tool can be of obvious value is in health and safety training.
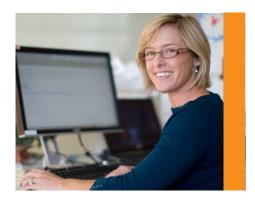
Many school districts are experienced in organizing classroom trainings to satisfy various regulatory requirements for groups of employees, such as custodial, maintenance, and grounds staff. The training must fit the schedule of the IT trainer and is often disruptive to staff schedules. It can be accomplished, but inconveniences and cost are a challenge.

Web-based Training

Many web-based training companies have started offering training which, if used wisely, reinforces a culture of safety within schools and complies with regulatory law and insurance policy conditions. Beyond the technical aspects, these programs may also involve behavior training courses, such as child abuse awareness, bullying/cyber bullying, school violence/weapons, and school intruders. They also may include more abstract training involving human resources issues, such as conflict management, diversity awareness, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), and sexual harassment.

There are advantages and disadvantages to web-based training, depending upon topic and audience. One disadvantage is the inability of employees to ask questions of a skilled professional who would be conducting the training in person. For certain topics, having a trainer available to answer situation-specific questions, provide live demonstrations, and share anecdotes is especially valuable. For example, a web-based Crisis Intervention and Prevention (CIP) training session for special education staff could not possibly be as instructive as a classroom session where staff can see a trainer demonstrate specific restraining techniques and discuss situations sensitive to a specific worksite.

A web-based medical model that uses "VP" (virtual patients) is advantageous, however, because it offers a safe environment in which to demonstrate techniques with no risk to a patient or student. Other subject matters that are similar and modular, such as bloodborne pathogens or compressed gas safety, may be successfully communicated to employees through Internet training, especially if school-specific information includes whom to contact for questions. In virtually all cases, the risks associated with the issues mentioned are preventable and the responses standardized. The thoughtful blending of live and electronic training is almost always the best path.

Technology Challenges

Technology limitations sometimes pose challenges to districts attempting to incorporate web-based trainings. Several school districts have shared their frustrations in dealing with companies whose products are incompatible with their IT systems. For example, an employee may be in the middle of an online training session when the computer shuts down, forcing the employee to completely start over. Also, bandwidth constraints caused by ever-higher-quality memory absorbing audio and video may present problems; as a result, server size and network capabilities within a school district could make it difficult to view certain portions of the online training. The necessary firewalls that schools must institute can also pose problems. Recognizing these challenges, school districts must research and pre-qualify providers. Involving school district IT personnel from the beginning of the process is vital to preventing or at least reducing connectivity issues.

Web-based Training Advantages

When they operate correctly, web-based health and safety trainings offer great advantages to both employees and administrators. Some studies have indicated increased retention rates by learners who take Internet trainings. Self-paced multi-

media instruction allows trainees to learn at their own pace, skipping or skimming areas where they are strong, and investing more time in areas of weakness or specific concern. The better web-based trainings run integrated visual presentations with audio and text explanations, providing a format that satisfies diverse adult learning styles. However, a key aspect of web-based learning is "self-directedness." In other words, a person has to be motivated. A good training program will include interactive scenarios to engage the employee and quizzes to help track information retention and focus on student-specific areas of strengths and weaknesses. Online systems also provide employees 24/7 access so they can more easily accommodate work and personal schedules, and may even qualify for Continuing Education Credits (CECs) in professional areas of accreditation.

Advantages of web-based training for administrators include:

- a cost-effective solution for offering a wide range of training topics to relevant employees,

- an easier system for tracking and maintaining training records for regulatory compliance, and

- an enhanced set of tools to reinforce positive health and safety learning environments within schools.

In addition, fewer dollars are needed for instructors' time and travel costs, as well as employees' time to sit through hard-to-schedule classroom training sessions. Administrative time dedicated to coordinating training dates and locations, hand-scoring tests, and managing training records is also reduced.

Web-based training strengthens a school district's process for managing and maintaining employee training records, which are required by OSHA or other regulatory agencies and insurance organizations. The records also safeguard a district from citation, successful civil litigation, and

increasing levels of public concern regarding safe and healthy schools.

A fair amount of administrative work is required on the front end of the transition to web-based training. However, once the program is implemented, updating and maintaining it is significantly less labor intensive.

Most of the products on the market today include electronic certificates of completion, quizzes, and participation records that are automatically archived to reduce administrative recordkeeping burdens. Web-based programs may also be used to train employees who are unable to attend classroom training sessions because of illness, vacation, or other personal reasons. The disruption to normal operations is significantly reduced, once a responsible program is in place.

Most importantly, incorporating web-based training into a school district's overall training regimen can contribute greatly toward improving the health and safety of staff and students. Administrators may choose from a broad array of topics and easily assign employees to training modules that will enhance their knowledge on specific topics. Unique, targeted training can also be seamlessly folded into the training package, e.g. how to safely vent a clean fine arts kiln.

An insurance representative from a local workers compensation carrier recently shared with us her view that web-based training as a stand-alone system for training has serious limitations. After all, she stated, people are used to learning from other people, not computer screens. Those sentiments are strong and need to be taken into consideration, but time and financial constraints are on the side of better, higher impact, web-based training programs.

We believe that online programming should be included as part of a school district's training approach. Like most good solutions to complicated problems, the trick is to select the right tool for the right job and work toward non-disruptive change. Web-based training is a good tool now and getting better, but a thoughtful blending with quality, live human training may make the most sense for the greatest impact.

As with most quality changes, a thinking person needs to guide the change.

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