

# Managers Letter

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## Going to School on the Internet — A Way to Leverage Employee/Employer Value

by Philip Tarantino, RN, MBA, PhD

It's no secret that investments in workplace technology can benefit a company's bottom line. But investing in employee education and training to make the most of that new technology is essential. In fact, an innovative education option — distance learning — offers exceptional return on investment. By providing access to accredited institutions for higher education and corporate training centers at convenient times and locations, distance-learning programs bolster core competencies without requiring significant time off the job. Managers who encourage distance- and lifelong-learning opportunities foster a corporate culture rich in critical thinkers, general knowledge and productivity.

### Distance Learning — A New Wave Solution

Today's quickly expanding information age, which emerged from a rare synergy among technologies, has resulted in the kind of radical change that may occur only once or twice in a century, said Allen Greenspan, Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, when he testified before Congress in June 1997. This expansion of the knowledge base has added unprecedented value to the products of many companies and has reduced the cost of production and distribution of goods and services. In fact, it may be the most profound change since the shift from agrarian to industrial economies, according to Dale Neef, editor of *The Knowledge Economy: Resources for the Knowledge Based Economy (1998)*.

Today's businesses reap rewards based on how quickly and well they use new information to uncover and solve organizational and/or industry problems. So, it is not surprising that institutions of higher education, business and industry — as well as the armed forces — were quick to implement electronic media as teaching and communications tools for students and employees who were tied to remote locations or hectic travel schedules.

Today's employees recognize that skill building and education are key to prospering in this knowledge-driven economy. And they seek education vehicles that do not impair their ability to satisfy job and family responsibilities.

A number of major corporations now provide employees with easy access to college campuses, educational services and training. Well reputed for their investments in staff development, Lotus Corporation, IBM, Computer Associates and Ford Motor Company offer distance-learning programs that allow employees to advance their skills with little disruption to their schedules. These employees either study at home, where they can maintain contact with their families, or after-hours in the workplace.

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Software industry giant Computer Associates has turned to distance-learning technologies to support its increased focus on staff development for technical and sales-related personnel. The company employs teleconferencing, video-conferencing and instructor-facilitated virtual and classroom training. "Distance education allows us to create a virtual team within the construct of a virtual classroom. Our program is in its infancy, but we anticipate that many employees will benefit from it," said John Cozzoli, Director of Training for Computer Associates in Hauppauge, NY. "We have a very mobile workforce," Mr. Cozzoli added. "The ability to reach them wherever they are, as opposed to pulling them from the field and away from their clients, is a bull's-eye for distance education. Another great advantage is the program's ability to share knowledge in a dynamic and timely way, which improves the performance of our staff."

### Concepts in Distance Learning

Online technology is easy to learn and is geared to modern study needs. Today's working professionals are increasingly comfortable with computers and are among a growing number of people who surf the Internet regularly, using it for research and enrichment.

A well-planned online education program provides students with information they need to succeed and affords them more time for studying, as well as modern study options. One new learning modality is the concept of Asynchronous Learning Networks (ALNs), which are people networks for anytime/anywhere learning that offer excellent support. ALNs combine self-study with substantial, rapid, asynchronous interactivity with other learners. Learners involved with ALNs use computers and other communication technologies along with remote resources such as coaches and fellow students. One benefit of ALNs is that participants do not all have to be online at the same time to profit from shared information.

### Choosing the Right Program

Guidelines for selecting quality distance education are similar to those designed for choosing classroom options. Advanced planning and understanding of goals are critical. Managers seeking to integrate distance-learning options for their employees should weigh the employee and employer needs against how well a distance-learning program can meet them. When evaluating a program, consider the following:

- Is the program centered on the needs of the learner? Is it convenient? Will it lead to the appropriate competency, degree and/or licensing?
- Do the program's educational strategies and activities make sense in terms of the subject matter?
- Are educational strategies and activities delivered in an appealing context that maximizes the student's motivation to learn?
- Are provisions available for local library access, monitored tests and access to health care, if relevant?
- How well does the program meet the needs of students, faculty/administrators and employers?

### Ensuring High-Quality Distance Education

To ensure high-quality distance education that maximizes return on investment, employers/students should insist on a proper learning environment, including:

- Adequate screening for competency in distance learning (students should exhibit computer literacy and capabilities for self-direction before starting a distance-learning program).
- A help desk to respond to students' technical problems.
- A community of learners through which members can assist each other and learn from each other's experience (work groups, study teams, ALNs).
- Access to the instructor(s) via e-mail or phone to ensure help in understanding course materials.

### Distance Education Empowers Employers and Employees Alike

Today's exciting and far-reaching educational resources allow educators to creatively define and design effective, robust and quality-driven teaching and learning systems. A good distance-education program, which responds to the needs of remote student communities, can mimic the best aspects of the classroom in visuals, information and interaction.

Distance-learning programs offer employers a value-added enhancement important to recruiting and retention efforts. They help build a workforce of critical thinkers with solid business skills and improved morale. In addition, distance-learning programs offer advantages to employees, allowing them to increase their own value in the workplace by acquiring the latest and most relevant business and interpersonal skills.

Many universities offer such programs or courses and can be located through a search on the Internet or a call to the college admissions office. Among them are: California State University ([www.csudh.edu](http://www.csudh.edu)); Open University ([www.open.ac.uk/frames.html](http://www.open.ac.uk/frames.html)); the State University of New York at Stony Brook School of Nursing ([www.uhmc.sunysb.edu/nursing](http://www.uhmc.sunysb.edu/nursing)); and University of Notre Dame ([www.nd.edu/~execprog](http://www.nd.edu/~execprog)).

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