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Technology

Upgrade Your Technology Skills

by *Martin B. Schneiderman*

Each year I conduct technology assessments for many different grantmaking and nonprofit organizations. Lots of people seem to think that their problems will be solved once they install new hardware and software. This is rarely the case.

Technology by itself doesn't solve problems or produce productivity gains. It's how technology is applied and managed that makes the big difference. The importance of training is consistently underestimated.

Most computer users are self-taught and are typically beginner/intermediate users of the software that they use every day. They're also now using their computers in more demanding and complex ways than ever before. Folks acknowledge their limitations saying, "I'm so busy that I don't have the time to go to training." In fact, they're so busy because they haven't made the time to go to training.

Most organizations don't budget and spend nearly enough time or money to upgrade their technology skills. This approach is very costly, because the payback on this investment can be realized many times over within days or weeks.

Training Options

When you know how to use the right tools you can be far more productive and make better-informed decisions. Consider the following range of options:

- 1 | **Classroom training.** Instructor-led hands-on training is one of the most effective ways to learn a new application. Ensure that the course is a good fit for your needs; if it's not, then arrange for a customized program. Then take classes out of the office to avoid being interrupted. *Cost: about \$250 per person/class day.*
- 1 | **Web-based training.** Training directly via the Internet is the newest approach and has the advantage of being available at anytime from anywhere using a Web browser. Some lessons require a sound card and speaker. *Cost: starting at \$6 for two-week on-line access to a course.*
- 1 | **Computer-based Training (CBT).** Interactive computer training programs can run on your PC or from a networked computer for multiuser access. These programs often require a PC with a CD-ROM, a sound card and speaker. *Cost: starting at \$50/lesson.*
- 1 | **Videos.** Watching an expert user demonstrate how to use software can be an effective way to learn. It's a good idea to have a VCR with a PC nearby running the same version of the software. *Cost: starting at \$50/lesson.*
- 1 | **User manuals.** Today most software comes with minimal

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documentation. You can select from myriad manuals at your local bookseller. Order a latte and find a book that fits your style. *Cost: \$25-40.*

- | **On-line help.** Don't forget your software's built-in context-sensitive on-line help. The best ones have step-by-step instructions with graphical examples. *Cost: free.*

Tips

The following tips will help you make the most of your training time and money.

- | Ensure that all key staff attend classes. Don't cancel at the last minute and send the temp as a pinch hitter.
- | Select top-rated training programs, not computer-based page-turners or talking heads. Return bad programs for a refund.
- | Be sure you have all the prerequisite skills before taking a course. Some CBT and Web-based courses offer good placement tests.
- | Apply new skills immediately upon returning from training.
- | Combine instructor-led training with follow-up Web-based, CBT and video training.
- | Buy cost-effective suites of beginner, intermediate and advanced materials to meet the needs of all staff.
- | Use headphones in open space offices.
- | Establish a lending library for training materials so that staff can use them at home.

Learning is an ongoing process, so buy new learning materials and attend courses whenever you're upgrading to a new application or system.

Remember: If you won't train, don't complain.

Check these Web sites for product information and to take on-line training for a test drive:

- | www.learn2.com
- | www.learnkey.com

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