

Just-in-Time Training

By Elizabeth Agnvall

With MP3 players, iPods and other mobile devices, employee training is truly on the go.

Those little white ear-phones peeking out from sweatshirts and business suits are everywhere.

From subways to treadmills to office cubicles, millions of people are plugged into MP3 players, usually iPods by Apple Computer. Users may be getting their groove on to the latest U2 download, harmonizing with Etta James or passing the time with James Patterson's newest best seller.

Or they may be sharpening their business skills.

Increasingly, users of MP3 players are listening to corporate training downloads on everything from how to close an important sales deal to optimizing organizational change to learning business Spanish.

Since emerging in the summer of 2004, MP3 technology has allowed users to create content on any subject. These

"podcasts"—the word's roots are iPod and broadcast—let listeners subscribe to a show and have it automatically downloaded onto a computer (or onto an iPod or MP3 player that's plugged into a computer). A delivery system known as Really Simple Syndication, or RSS, makes it easy for users to synchronize and update audio files. (For more information on converting material to podcasts, see "Podcasting 101" on page 69.)

Corporate trainers have begun to capitalize on the ease of the technology and the enormous growth in the number of MP3 users with cost-effective multimedia files that inform and educate. According to a recent report from eMarketer, an Internet research group based in New York, the number of podcast users grew to 11.4 million last year, up from 800,000 in 2004, and could reach about 55 million by 2010. The Pew

Internet and American Life Project, a research center in Washington, D.C., says 11 percent of U.S. consumers now own an iPod or other MP3 player.

As today's mobile gadget world continues to evolve at lightning speed, it behooves HR and training professionals to dream a little bit about the possibilities. One day soon, companies will be able to deliver streaming video and audio to all employees at once anywhere on the globe.

The key question is whether the technology can be useful for employee training, and companies increasingly are saying yes. They are transforming training content into podcasts and, in some instances, supplying the MP3 players as well. They say the cost is worth the investment because employees are seizing opportunities to learn whenever and wherever they want.

Expanding Trainers' Arsenals

While experts agree that mobile training will never replace traditional face-to-face learning—just as e-learning has not replaced classroom instruction—mobile devices can be added to the toolkits of corporate training.

"We see this as becoming a cog in the corporate wheel," says Rob Mottola, director of operations at NightGlass Media Group, a Duluth, Ga., firm that produces podcasts and other multimedia materials for companies. Mottola says companies are just scratching the surface on applications for mobile media devices for employees.

"It's an inexpensive way to broadcast information to train employees" who are on the go, says Jenna Sweeney, president of CramerSweeney Instructional Design, a firm in Moorestown, N.J., that creates customized corporate training materials. "You can be on an airplane, you can be taking a walk or riding your bike" while you listen to training content.

Inspired by Duke University's move to

provide all students with iPods, McLean, Va.-based Capital One, in a pilot program begun in September 2004, bought 50 iPods to give to a random sampling of associates and loaded the devices with material generated by Capital One University, the financial services corporation's training organization.

Buoyed by positive feedback generated from surveys on the pilot program, the company purchased 3,000 iPods for distribution to associates who had signed up for the 20 most popular instructor-led courses offered at Capital One University.

The company partnered with Internet audio book provider Audible.com to create an audio learning site within the company firewall where employees can download material. On the web page, Capital One posts everything from quarterly earnings calls to its executive speaker series. The company also posts popular business books that fit with the company's culture.

For traditional training courses, instructors request books and other audio materials that augment their material—an option that Geoff Rubin, instructor for a corporate risk course at Capital One, calls "a terrific alternative."

At Capital One, 93 percent of employees said podcast learning is a worthwhile use of their time.

Steve Arneson, senior vice president of learning and development at Capital One, stresses that the audio learning is part of the company's focus on blended learning—classroom, multimedia and written materials.



Steve Arneson, senior vice president of learning and development at Capital One.

"Many of the courses that we chose to augment with audio content are traditional competency or skill courses," Arneson says. "We still believe there is a ton of value in being in the classroom with your peers. We just want to add to that experience with audio content."

The approach seems to be working: In an employee survey last October, 94 percent of the respondents said they would recommend the company's audio learning to others, 92 percent said it's a worthwhile investment for Capital One, and 93 percent said it's a worthwhile use of their time.

One employee commented in the survey report: "I love audio learning because I can listen to lectures or speeches while driving, jogging or working in the yard that I simply wouldn't access another way." Another said: "One of the biggest advantages of the iPod is that you can learn at your convenient open times and not lose an entire day (or more) from deliverables."

Creating the Content

Anders Gronstedt, president of the Gronstedt Group, a Broomfield, Colo., firm that develops front-line training, including podcasts, for companies, maintains there's a right way and there's a wrong way to use the new technology for training employees.

"Companies should use [podcasts] in an area where there's an ongoing need for training, reinforcement and communication," Gronstedt says. Because a new podcast can be put together in a few days—or even in a few hours—it's unmatched for breaking news or for up-to-the-minute employee training on, for example, basic sales skills or new product development.

The podcast should stick with company culture, be entertaining and even be a bit edgy, Gronstedt says. The podcasts that Gronstedt produces for companies, for example, are in talk radio format with a host, callers and fake commercials.

This works well because, while a trainer in a classroom has a captive audience, a session delivered over a mobile device has to compete for attention. In the car, for example, people can choose to listen to satellite radio, talk radio or CDs; they need a good reason to choose the latest corporate training podcast.

"There's a real risk that the training staff could hijack this new technology" and make it an audio version that replicates the classroom presentation exactly, Gronstedt says. If it becomes a replay of a one-hour training seminar, he says, it will fail.

If You Build It, They Will Podcast

One way to generate excitement is to let employees create content. At IBM, for example, there's an internal tool that any employee—from a software developer to a financial consultant—can use to post podcasts.

The idea, says Ben Edwards, manager of investor communications at IBM's headquarters in Armonk, N.Y., was to put out the tool and let IBM's

creative, tech-savvy employees take it over. The company posted liberal guidelines and trusted the employees to use good judgment. »

Podcasting 101

According to the experts, podcasting is simple. All you need is a computer with speakers, a microphone and an Internet connection, says Dave Evans, co-founder of Hearthis.com, which provides podcasting services.

"Podcasting is the idea of taking a multimedia file and creating a file feed that goes with it," Evans explains. "The file feed gets syndicated in the same way a blog gets syndicated."

Listeners use RSS (Really Simple Syndication) technology to subscribe to the "feed" and download new podcasts automatically when online. "Syndication" means that people can get new podcasts that are part of a series sent to their computers without having to go to the Internet site each time and download them. Users can then transfer them to an MP3 player, iPod or cell phone with audio file capability.

(Technically, it's not podcasting when a company simply makes audio files available to employee computers or mobile devices in a series. Podcasting refers to the use of RSS to automatically download files.)

Don't go halfway into the initiative if you want users to keep coming back for more podcasts, says Steve Arneson, senior vice president of learning and development at financial services giant Capital One, which produces original content in an in-house studio at nominal cost. "You have to commit yourself to it with resources," he says. "You have to be willing to sustain it."

To create professional-sounding material in-house, you'll need more than a laptop. Following are some recommendations to get started:

- **Audacity.** Free, open-source software for recording and editing sounds. It is available for Mac OS X, Microsoft Windows, GNU/Linux and other operating systems.
- **Sound Forge.** Sony's professional sound editing software for Windows, which includes an extensive set of audio processes, tools and effects for manipulating audio. Combine Sound Forge with any Windows-compatible sound card to create, record, edit and refine audio files. Entry-level Sound Forge Audio Studio costs about \$70, while professional Sound Forge 8 costs about \$300.
- **Adobe Audition.** Record, mix, edit and master digital audio files. Create music, produce radio spots and edit imperfect recordings. Bring audio and video together using smart integration with Adobe video applications. The software costs about \$350.
- **Final Cut Studio.** For video and audio editing, Sun Microsystems podcast developers recommend this Apple software, which costs about \$1,300.
- **Studio equipment.** Invest in good-quality microphones (such as the Shure SM58, \$204 with cable), digital recorders (industry standard is Marantz PMD660, \$499) and headphones (such as Sony pro models, \$50 to \$100) for a step up on audio quality.

—Elizabeth Agnwall

Since October, employees have uploaded 156 podcasts. Employees can use the podcasting pilot web site to rank the podcasts by most popular download, or they can conduct a keyword search. The site has everything from an ongoing battle of the bands with music by IBM employees to a radio-style show from a research and development lab in Hursley, England.

Alexis Conelias, a learning consultant with IBM Learning in Piscataway, N.J., which is responsible for education and training for the IBM workforce, began creating podcasts for sales and solutions education and training for the global sales team. The podcasts use interviews and discussions with internal experts to teach and inform the team about competitors, products, customers, information management, new initiatives and sales solutions. She advertised the "Xseries" through e-mails and newsletter articles to the team she wanted to target.

"This was the perfect solution for trying to get information to our sales team," Conelias says. Because the global sales force is so mobile, it's difficult to find a good time for face-to-face education or even conference calls. This way, the sales team can download the latest segment on a train, in a car or even waiting for a meeting at the client site.

"It fits into their lifestyle," Conelias explains. "It's education on the go." She adds, however, that the podcast series does not replace other types of education.

Building the Buzz

Many companies that are just beginning to experiment with pushing out training to mobile devices are targeting internal groups—large and small—with specific needs that can benefit most from the learn-on-the-go option.

At information storage giant EMC Corp. in Hopkinton, Mass., a sales representative's suggestion spawned the idea of offering training through podcasts to 7,000 sales personnel.



While the company uses a number of e-learning courses, James Hunsicker, manager of sales education and productivity programs at EMC's Education Services division, says the mobile sales force often doesn't have extra time to spend at a computer.

"A lot of the sales reps in the field tell us the best time they have for training is when they are in the car," he says. Hunsicker mainly pulls audio files from training materials the company already has. Employees download the files onto MP3 players, iPods or CDs and listen to them while driving to and from sales calls. To promote the awareness and the use of training available in MP3 format, EMC purchased 200 iPods to give to employees.

Several different types of audio files are available for download through the company intranet.

Hunsicker makes the audio tracks from the biweekly OnMessage program available in MP3 format. This 50-minute "TV news anchor"-style show delivers information about everything from enhancing the customer experience to new product launches to key strategies for the year ahead. Since the November launch of the training podcast library, EMC has seen several thousand downloads.

"It's all about making it easy for the

sales reps to tap into the training we have available—when and where they want it," Hunsicker says.

Jim Wilson, account technical consultant at EMC Federal in McLean, Va., appreciates the portability, which enables him to catch up on marketing messages and training during his hour-long commute each way. "It is a great use of my time, and I appreciate the work that has been put into it," says Wilson. "The OnMessage is very well produced, especially compared to the other podcasts I listen to."

Wilson also likes the ability to choose whether to hear a training course at his computer or download it onto his iPod and take it with him. The podcasts have "definitely improved my productivity in ways traditional training wouldn't," he adds. "For instance, with our latest hardware offering, the DMX-3, I saw that there was an OnMessage video available but never had the time to sit and watch it for 30 to 45 minutes. I got the same information from the MP3 [albeit without video] and feel that it had the same, if not more, impact than if I had sat down and watched it."

Recognizing the video podcast demand from its employees, EMC is looking into making training available on video iPods and through BlackBerry devices.

► Online Resources

For more information on podcast training, see the online version of this article at www.shrm.org/hrmagazine/06May.

There you will find links to:

- An SHRM HR Technology Focus Area article on podcasting.
- A sample training podcast.
- A tutorial on creating a podcast.
- A list of podcasts available for download.

I Want My iPod Video

EMC is not the only company upgrading to video podcasting. Athena Online, an Oakland, Calif., developer of computer-based and online learning materials for *Fortune* 500 companies, already produces streaming video, audio and animation to deliver five-minute briefings to customized web portals. So it was a natural move to go to MP3 players, says CEO Jon Peters.

Last June, the company began adding MP3 audio versions of educational content to subscribers. Now the company is working with MCAP, a Toronto-based mortgage company, to provide audio and video content for video iPods.

Karen Calder, director of learning and leadership development at the 700-employee MCAP, says this type of training could bridge the gap between classroom learning and on-the-job knowledge. She says employees can use this type of "coaching on demand" to access strategies, tips and techniques for help with challenging issues exactly when they are ready to absorb it. "It becomes highly relevant and timely, which is what today's 21st century workers need," Calder says. "They don't want all of the information all at once. They want tidbits that they can use."



Karen Calder, director of learning and leadership development at MCAP.

Formats

Sun Microsystems of Santa Clara, Calif., uses podcasting for tips of the week for its java software developers, and a Sun hu-

man resource group provides audio management tips for executives to download.

Some types of material are not well-suited for podcasts, says Jenny Dearborn, senior manager for learning and development at Sun's worldwide operations. For example, she believes it would be ineffective to produce sexual harassment or diversity training for iPods. Highly sensitive or proprietary information is also inappropriate for iPod or MP3 learning.

In addition, Dearborn suggests that highly technical material should be no longer than three to five minutes. Quality is important, but if users are hungry for information, they'll be willing to listen even if the sound quality isn't perfect, she says. However, that's likely to change, she adds, as people become accustomed to the novelty of the new technology and yearn for better graphics and better interactivity.

The Future Is Bright

Today, companies pay for multimedia devices for executives, salespeople and other mobile employees. But as multimedia in cell phones and other devices become ubiquitous, that can expand to all kinds of employees.

Experts foresee a day when electric company employees can watch a video on how to repair a downed line just before a service call, or when pilots can review a new safety checklist before takeoff. The type and scope of training will be limited only by the imagination of those creating the content.

"As the systems become more robust, people will be able to add more interactivity, the lessons will become longer, and [employees] will create courseware," Peters says. "These are going to be the standards for mobile learning." ■

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