

Remote training tools – the wonder of Web 2.0 or just a chance to get in a tangle? How new technologies are being used to support training in online information resources

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We wanted to understand more about how organisations are using established and new technologies to support end-user training of their online information resources and to investigate which approaches are the most successful. We surveyed online training materials from database/information providers to which we had access. Different technologies and applications were categorised and then evaluated in terms of their usefulness in delivering training direct to end-users, and/or their value in supporting local trainers or training sessions.



Word documents/PDFs

What is it? Quick reference guides were popular in PDF format. Some suppliers had starter guides in several languages. Larger database companies provided information on how to search complex databases using manuals on basic and advanced searching.

Pros: Low cost. Can be tailored for training sessions for trainers to print off as handouts or for remote end users to refer to. PDFs have the advantage of presenting the material in a house style where editing is limited, whereas Word documents can be edited for use in localised training sessions.

Cons: Text oriented, static documents that do not suit everyone's learning style. Large PDFs with images may take a while to download. Can be easily plagiarised. No interactivity

Web based Powerpoints

What is it? These were either web-based or downloadable .ppt versions. Some suppliers had web-based powerpoints to promote their products and also as training resources. Cochrane had a powerpoint explaining the Cochrane Library describing its benefits and features and how to search.

Pros: For trainers files can be downloaded and customised. Useful for training sessions where a trainer is talking through the powerpoint and where there is no internet access.

Cons: Files can be large and slow to download. Not that useful for remote users or trainers if notes about each slide are not supplied. Wading through a series of cryptic bullet points can be a bit of a waste of time. No interactivity.

Good example:
Cochrane: http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/mrwhome/106568753/HELP_Cochrane.html?CRETRY=1&SRETRY=0

Web pages

What is it? All of the sites reviewed had Web pages specifically devoted to training. Some were simple pages linking out to documents. Others were more detailed.

Pros: Not technically difficult to produce. Can add links to promote other resources/products outlining various training options and drilling down to more detailed training pages.

Cons: Not interactive or novel, a bit boring as everyone does it.

Good examples:
PubMed: http://www.nlm.nih.gov/bsd/dist_edu.html
Essential Evidence Plus: http://www.essentialevidenceplus.com/product/features_ir.cfm
Up-to-date: <http://www.uptodate.com/home/help/demo/index.html>

Flash tutorials

What is it? This popular feature was included in many of the sites reviewed. Having the feel of an animated powerpoint presentation but with accompanying audio commentary, the mouse moves over the image to highlight functionalities and the speaker describes the product. End-users can pause at any time or go to the previous screen. Suppliers used this format to give a 'guided tour' or 'expert walk' through the product, backed up by examples on how to find specific information.

Pros: Useful as a basis for a training session. Very useful for remote users who can get a clear idea of how best to use a product. Visual examples, moving images and audio makes the learning experience easier and more enjoyable than reading text based documents.

Cons: End users need Macromedia Flash®, QuickTime®, or Windows Media® to be installed. No interactivity.

Good examples:
Yale University Medical Library: <http://cwml-tutorials.blogspot.com/search/label/Evidence-Based%20Practice>
PubMed: http://www.nlm.nih.gov/bsd/disted/video/flash/MeSH_07_flv/index.html



Online training courses

What is it? Two sorts of courses were identified:

(a) online live courses where a trainer uses the telephone to speak to a group of end users, taking them through a series of live online demos. Or a powerpoint, which could cover explaining what a product is or how to search it. This format gives end users the opportunity to ask questions, share ideas and exchange experiences.

(b) online courses delivered sequentially as learning modules without telephone trainer interaction. These can have a certain amount of interactivity such as exercises or multiple choice questions at the end of each module and can be linked to external accreditation schemes. The larger database providers (e.g. Ovid, Dialog) provided both types of courses.

Pros: Good for delivering information to a wide audience without the cost of travel. Validated courses with accreditation schemes can contribute to continuing professional development. Online modules can be done at a time convenient for the remote user.

Cons: Potential technical difficulties at both ends. Can be time consuming for providers to set up and for users to complete in work hours.

Good examples:
Pubmed: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/bsd/disted/clinics/pmupdate08.html>
Dialog: <http://support.dialog.com/training/movie.shtml>
Essential Evidence Plus: <http://www.essentialevidenceplus.com/events.cfm>

Podcasts

What is it? Audio and video podcasts are being used to great effect by information providers to market products, increase product awareness and gain web traffic. Some of the resources reviewed had podcasts. None of the products that were reviewed had podcasts solely as training resources.

Pros: A useful add-on for training purposes to explain what resources are and why they should be used without the trainer having to do this. An effective way to hear opinion. Also helpful for remote users who want a feel for the product and how it can be used in the workplace.

Cons: Audio podcasts have no pictures which would be a disadvantage for training users in searches where visuals are needed. For video podcasts, end users need Macromedia Flash®, QuickTime®, or Windows Media® to be installed.

Good examples:
Cochrane: <http://cochrane.org/podcasts/>
Essential Evidence Plus: <http://www.essentialevidenceplus.com/subscribe/netcast.cfm>

Blogs

What is it? These enable a dialogue with and between users making them feel more involved with a service and more likely to return to the products web content. However none of the products that were reviewed had blogs solely as training resources.

Pros: Can be set up quickly for free using blogger software. Creates a separate entry point for people to find your web site, hence increasing traffic. Good to alert users of news and share ideas and promote communication. Can link out to other sites of related interest.

Cons: Blogs have come under criticism that they contain inaccurate information and if not frequently updated are no different than 'normal' websites.

Wikis

What is it? A wiki allows users to freely create and edit web page content using any Web browser. It can allow visitors to add, remove, and sometimes edit the available content. This ease of interaction and operation makes a wiki an effective tool for collaborative authoring. However none of the products that were reviewed had wikis solely as training resources.

Pros: Interactive with users, can add and share knowledge on subjects. Can add and edit content easily and incorporate cross-links and out-links, links to video etc. An information training resources wiki could give access to instructions, resources and discussion spaces.

Cons: Costly (in time) to keep up to date and also regulate and edit additions by other contributors. Opinion based and exposed to vandalism and errors without secure editing. Legal implications to consider?



Discussion

Making training materials user friendly and easily available to trainers increases the likelihood of trainers including these resources in their training sessions.

For end users themselves, supplying information on the what, when, why and how to use a resource would help them in quickly and effectively retrieving the information they are looking for and so increase their likelihood of returning to the product again. Training support web pages help remote users who would otherwise not have the time or inclination to travel to a training session. It gives them an understanding and confidence to use a resource most effectively at a time and place that best suits them. Many of the products reviewed used the concept of 'Blended learning' i.e. providing different modes of delivery of essentially the same material to users, because information providers realise that users have different technologies available to them, different information literacy levels and different learning styles.

The types of resources that could ideally be provided by product suppliers for use by trainers and end users are as follows:

Essential basics:

- (1) A training support webpage.
- (2) PDF 'quick-start' materials that users can print off for their own reference or for use in training sessions.
- (3) Flash tutorial on the benefits and features of the product.

Desirable but not essential:

- (1) Podcasts or vodcasts describing the product and interviewing stakeholders. This could include how a product is supporting practice and informing healthcare decisions i.e. real life testimonials. Interviews with contributors/authors discussing their research.
- (2) Having the essential basic requirements (above) available in different languages.
- (3) Having the essential basic requirements (above) available for PDA users.