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Agent Training on a Shoestring

Automated training modules use computers and websites to deliver precise bits of training information to reps. Do they work? Can they replace more traditional classroom training?

 By [Keith Dawson](#)

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Training is the centerpiece of any effort to create an agent population that represents your company well and creates a positive customer experience.

Traditional call center training has generally been of two types. Agents, either as new hires or as experienced reps, gather in classrooms for group learning in a "one-to-many" style familiar to everyone. Beyond that, agents will usually encounter one-to-one training with a coach who will directly guide the agent through the call handling process.

Classroom training emphasizes facts that need learning, like corporate policies and processes. Coaching emphasizes practice, the critical "learning by doing" that turns information into knowledge and then into experience.

In recent years, it's become possible (and desirable) to automate some of the processes involved. Training by computer (and more recently, by web) breaks some of those fact-learning and practice sessions into small, modular pieces and allows you to target them to specific people, in specific circumstances. It's rarely if ever seen as a replacement for traditional classroom training, or for hands-on coaching. But call centers are starting to experiment with it more deeply as they get comfortable with the technology and as the cost proposition becomes more attractive.

We asked some of the leading experts to tell us about how training is changing as it takes a few ginger steps into an automated world.

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TechEncyclopedia

How have computer- and webbased learning tools changed the process of training reps? [Center Manager](#)

Massood Zarrabian, CEO of [OutStart Corporation](#): The major change has been the development of blended training models. Instead of having separation of the types of training by the delivery channels, with content being developed by different authors, resulting in inconsistencies, many customers are moving to a blended model, where the same training is available on the web, in classrooms and in disconnected mode on the PC.

This model gives learners the freedom to choose the method that is most convenient for them. It also introduces the concept of self service since WBT and CBT modes are available to the reps. In fact, in the blended model a rep can start in one mode and finish using a different mode.

Connie Smith, Chief Evangelist, [Envision Corporation](#): Traditional CBT courses didn't work well for contact centers because they were generally 45 minutes to two hour courses. That was a significant amount of time to take agents off the phone for training. Also, the courses were very generic, a sort of "one size fits all." Centers today are using WBT to send targeted training to individuals which may be only three to five minutes in length and pertain to the individuals' needs.

David Amborski, executive director of customer care, [Knowlagent](#): No longer does a new rep sit in a classroom for two to three weeks listening to boring lectures on how to act or what to say to irate customers. Now, the new reps get a combination of "I'll tell you, I'll show you and you can practice it yourself" through the use of e-learning and simulation.

Second, it has expanded the ability to get training to the reps on the floor at their desktop. This eliminates taking them off the floor to a classroom which creates staffing and service level issues. The use of online learning over time will have a significant impact on a centers' ability to provide the much needed on-going training required in today's complex sales and customer service centers.

What do call centers have to do to create an effective automated training regimen?

Zarrabian: The most important aspect of training development for call centers is the ability to develop training rapidly, and be able to update it rapidly as changes are needed in their programs. It is also imperative that they are able to do so in a costeffective manner as changes may occur frequently. The solution must scale to meet those needs, without a heavy cash burden.

Smith: For CBT, you will not only need buy-in from senior management but a larger budget and the commitment to allocate training time for agents. For WBT, you will still need buy-in from senior management, but a lesser budget and less allocated time to train agents (as this can be done when call volumes drop).

Amborski: The key element to successful computer training is to make it interactive. The biggest pitfall for companies is to try and take some of their good classroom training and convert it "as-is" into training delivered through the computer. It becomes ... an uninteresting experience for the student. If the stand-up material is good, it can even be made better when moved to computer when the use of simulations and gaming are added to the mix.

What are some of the advantages to automating the process through CBT or WBT?

Amborski: [A key advantage] is the consistency of materials and the ability to re-purpose training quickly to meet changing business needs. These are significant because they now allow trainers to use the philosophy: "develop once, use many." By this I mean, they can develop training for new hire and use the same training as refresher training for seasoned reps.

If a learning object strategy is used (which means building the training in small logical pieces that when assembled in a specific sequence makes up a course), it allows the training team great latitude in responding to changes in the business environment. They can assemble the same materials in different sequences to form new courses as the business changes. Additionally, if new materials must be developed, they may only need to develop one small piece and leverage previously developed materials versus starting with a blank sheet of paper. In the fastpaced and cost-conscious world of call centers, this is a big advantage.

Zarrabian: The best way to look at this is by weighing the pros and cons of both WBT and CBT. For example, web-based training can be made readily available, where computer-based has

production delays associated with it (producing CDs as one example). WBT requires the rep to be connected to the infrastructure, where CBT allows disconnected use, which in turn allows reps more freedom in using it on their own time. WBT allows assessments to be done online, which results in better understanding of the skill gaps; CBT doesn't really address this issue efficiently.

Do hybrid offerings bridge the gaps between web-based and computer-based tools?

Smith: By combining all forms of media (WBT, CBT and traditional delivery), training can adapt to all learning styles and produce results that may be superior to one method of training. The secret to effective learning is to match the delivery to the learner's receptive style, provide enough hands-on training to reinforce the concepts and, if needed, test to "real business" problems and situations. ... [Automation tools] are only one component of training and should be used in addition to classroom training and coaching.

Amborski: As with any process, there is no one perfect way to do anything, but the use of a hybrid or blended learning approach gets you closer than either of the parts taken alone. Because we deal with such a complex and diverse cross-section of people in call centers, the use of blended learning allows you more latitude in providing training that works and supports most individuals.

The most successful training managers are the ones that can assess their audience and develop a blended learning approach that has the right balance of computer and classroom training to match that audience's needs and needs of their business.

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