

Now Hear This

Learners are all ears as training becomes the invasion of the iPod people.

By Dan Sussman

WE'RE ALL FAMILIAR with the list of electronic gadgets that has freed today's knowledge workers from their desks and made them mobile—laptop computers, PDAs, cellular phones, pagers, etc. Now you can add one more gizmo to the list—those ubiquitous digital music players typified by Apple's iPod.

With audio programming now easily available to anyone with computer and access to the web, companies are starting to look at "podcasts" as a means of enhancing employee training and development as well as reducing the cost of training. Case in point: Financial services provider Capital One, with more than 15,000 employees worldwide, now hands out Apple iPods as standard equipment for employees enrolled in training courses.

The driver behind Capital One's audio learning program is a vexing deficit, not in dollars and cents, but in time.

"It was a consensus that our associates are so busy that they just didn't have time during the average workday to get to the classroom. That's what we were hearing through surveys and focus groups," says Michael Walker, manager of learning services administrations at the company's Richmond, Virginia-based employee education unit, Capital One University. Consequently, Walker and others started thinking about ways of delivering training flexibly, allowing employees to absorb learning materials where and when they wanted. Audio training seemed like the perfect fit.

New wave in audio

Anyone who ever struggled through a high school language lab or who fought nicotine cravings while listening to "stop smoking" motivational cassettes can tell you that there's nothing fundamentally new about the concept of audio learning. You listen, and you learn. Or you don't. End of story. What is new, however, is the relative simplicity with which digitized learning audio, such as mp3 files, can be made available via the World Wide Web, listened to on computers, or automatically downloaded into iPods and similar audio players.

With the help of special podcast software, available free of charge, users can "subscribe" to various podcasts, which are automatically downloaded onto their computers as soon as they become available. Users can listen to the programs on their computers or transfer them to their portable audio players. While many websites provide free audio materials, commercial services, such as Audible.com, sell audiobooks, audio versions of magazines and newspapers, and other publications from their sites.

"The test ran for about 30 days. People loved the audio channel of learning. They were able to multiply their time, and they gained learning that they wouldn't have been able to get in the classroom," says Walker. "We also tried out three different audio devices and determined that the iPod was the best for us."

The pilot led Capital One to initiate a full-blown audio learning program shortly thereafter.

The first step was to provide learners with iPods. Learners had to sign an agreement stating that the devices were to be treated as a business tools and used appropriately. Nevertheless, Capital One is not prohibiting the use of iPods for music listening or other personal purposes.

Then, the coursework

A leadership development course was among the first offerings into which audio learning was integrated. In addition to classroom work, students downloaded a talk by a Capital One executive and an audio article on leadership from the *Harvard Business Review*. In another instance, newly minted college graduates hired by Capital One's credit card unit received iPods pre-loaded with an audio version of Barbara Ehrenreich's book *Nickel and Dimed*. The book is a detailed look at the trials low-wage earners face in trying to scrape by, day to day. The new hires were required to listen to the book before their first day of employment in order to understand more about Capital One's customers.

Mike Bress, a Capital One finance manager, gives the company's iPod learning program high marks. While classroom learning provides face-to-face interaction with instructors and classmates, its downsides include being tied to a location and a need to tailor classes for the "lowest common denominator" among the attendees, he says. "People who are more advanced don't get as much out of those courses," Bress adds.

On the other hand, audio learning lets users move at their own pace, and if there is material they don't understand or want to review, it's as simple as hitting the "reverse" key and listening again.

Bress received his iPod after signing up for a course on understanding "earnings calls"—the quarterly teleconferences in which Capital One executives brief financial industry analysts on the company's financial performance. As part of the course, Capital One recorded an earnings call and provided it to students, who were expected to review it before attending a class session to discuss it.

"I listened to it in two chunks. I started listening at home, and the flexibility to

do that was great. I could listen as long as I wanted, then I could go do something else and just pick up where I left off," he says.

Capital One undoubtedly is in the vanguard of companies interested in the use of podcasts (a medium born only about a year ago) and digital audio players for education, but it's certainly not alone in its interest.

Jenna Sweeney, president of the Moorestown, New Jersey-based training firm, CramerSweeney Instructional Design, says an entry about podcasting in her blog, "Corporate Training and E-Learning," elicited a number of queries from readers about the possibilities.

"Seeing the reaction and flood of questions I've actually had from my blog article, I think there's definitely something going on," says Sweeney. "Among the younger people, most have an iPod or another mp3 player. They're comfortable with these devices, as opposed to older folks who aren't necessarily as savvy. I would think podcasting is something that will be used more and more just based on the younger generation and what they're accustomed to."

Anders Groenstedt, whose Broomfield, Colorado firm, the Groenstedt Group, specializes in computer-based simulations to train sales and service organizations, says several of his clients have begun to use podcasts as part of their training materials.

"For several years we'd been supplementing our online simulations with audio CDs, which we found to be really effective. With podcasting, distribution became much cheaper," Groenstedt says.

He cautions, however, that simply recording lectures, digitizing them, and distributing them via the web is a sure road to failure. There is a fundamental difference between what holds the interest of students in a classroom and those listening on an iPod. You have to model podcasts in ways familiar to audiences of other aural media, he says.

"For example, we frequently create simulated radio shows, such as a sports radio format. We hire actors and we include a little music, callers—usually ficti-

tious—phone in with questions and enable us to provide sound-bite answers. In other words, we model our audio presentation to capture listeners the same way talk radio does."

He also says it's important not to treat audio as a standalone teaching medium, but to integrate it into an overall program.

Just the beginning

Matt Schuyler, Capital One's executive vice president of Human Resources, says the company has just started measuring the effects of the audio learning program on employees, but adds that early indicators are positive.

"Their productivity is up, so literally, we're making more revenue and income with fewer employees. Their learning is increasing as measured by their ability to take on stretch assignments, new roles, broader responsibilities, and so forth. And, I guess people vote with their feet. We have waiting lists for this program. We can't distribute the courses and tools fast enough."

Schuyler acknowledges that receipt of an iPod—among the hottest technology products these days—could be part of the reason for employee enthusiasm. But he adds that it's just one tool in what Capital One calls "the future of work."

"It's another technology, like laptops, cell phones, and Blackberries, that enables us not to tether employees to their desks. For example, they can float anywhere on our 400-acre campus in Richmond and use our wireless network. They can go from team to team and meeting to meeting and still get their work done."

And audio is just the beginning, adds Schuyler. All the company needs is a fatter wireless "pipe" to add video to the mix.

"Picture your PDA or your cell phone being able to receive curriculum from us, complete with a talking head, like you'd normally get when you go to a classroom," says Schuyler. "It's just a few years away." **TD**

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