

## 'Top Ten Tips' – When considering the use of online training

Lord Laming's recent report on the protection of children in England has called for a step change in the arrangements to protect children from harm. One of his primary recommendations is that practitioners need to receive further training post-qualification to deal with an increasing number of "complex and risky" cases such as Baby P, for which he said greater expertise is required.

When investing in training programmes for practitioners, organisations must invest in long-term strategies. Training managers must ensure practitioners are informed, working in an integrated manner and following the latest national guidelines.

When online training is successfully adopted it has been proven to deliver significant benefits across an organisation; this has been proven and is beyond doubt. However the real challenge for all organisations considering e-learning is to ensure the training ends up on the desk and not on the shelf.

Here we look at Me Learning's 'Top 10 Tips' that Social Care Training Managers should consider when investing in training programmes and initiatives in the future. Me Learning provides organisations with online training tools to ensure all practitioners involved in social care are fully informed, working together and following the latest national guidelines, protocols and legislation.

- 1. Blend your training:** An overwhelming 95% of respondents to the 2008 CIPD survey of learning and development believed that training is most effective when formats such as classroom and online training are undertaken in a blended manner. Despite the substantial benefits of e-learning, it is not the total training solution. There needs to be a balance between remote learning and classroom interactivity. Under the right conditions, classroom training is still one of the most effective training methods as it involves group interaction and the exchanging of ideas. One of the main problems with classroom training is that time is wasted because people attend courses with varied skills, knowledge and experiences. A blended approach to learning tackles this problem: for example prior to classroom training, people would complete an online course to introduce the material so that every person is prepared. Organisations would be ill advised to select one format as the answer to all their problems; each method has its advantages and disadvantages, which should be harnessed to provide a holistic training solution.
- 2. Make your learning interactive:** Classroom training has a tendency to bring out the inner child in us all. It feels like being back at school, so there is a tendency for students to slump back and take notes that will never be looked at again. Often in this environment the speed a group learns at is affected by how outgoing individuals are. A blended training programme ensures variety and prevents training from becoming a static, stale classroom experience. Using online learning courses in a classroom environment gives users something to do straight away, forcing them to sit up and take notice. Getting straight into the action can send an important signal that there's no sitting back in this classroom.

- 3. Give learners control:** One of the greatest changes to the provision of training to practitioners in the last few years has been the move towards learner-centred training and the importance of giving individuals control over their learning. Online learning is ideal for this, because learners can choose when and how to engage with it and can progress at their own speed. As online training places most of the responsibility with the learner, many motivated people prefer this approach because it is a stimulating and efficient alternative to classroom training.
- 4. Provide choice:** Learning is not always best undertaken in a group. Depending on learning preferences, practitioners may feel constricted in a group learning environment, preferring a more private experience. Users may not want to publically divulge their lack of understanding on a subject. This is the main reason many role-playing facilitator-led environments don't work and why interactive role-playing online is conversely growing in popularity. It is important to assess what training styles work best and offer a choice of learning options to ensure every practitioner receives an optimum learning experience.
- 5. Support the Green agenda and reduce your carbon footprint:** Often classroom training is centralised and requires practitioners to take time away from their daily duties and travel across a county. This is costly, time consuming and increases their carbon footprint. Centralised classroom based training is ideal for meeting peers and group discussion, but organisations should consider whether some elements of their training programmes could be more effectively taken by students online, either from their own offices or from home.
- 6. Be concise:** Training needs to cover the relevant topics, issues and legislation, but not be too lengthy. Online courses mean practitioners spend less time in the classroom without compromising on the quality of learning. E-learning courses progress up to 50% faster than traditional courses (source: Training and Development 2002). The likelihood of fatigue and drop-off in attention span and retention levels is reduced and users are more likely to return for refreshers which will lead to an increase in knowledge retention when compared with an equivalent classroom course.
- 7. Opt for automatic updates:** All e-learning courses have a shelf life. If something changes, for example a change in law or a new process that affects the course then the course may no longer be relevant and can even become misleading. It is important, therefore, to consider choosing courses that are updated as new guidelines or laws are passed, because many training courses – whether they are printed or online - do not have this pre-requisite in place. You may have to purchase a newer version of the course if one is released, or the company may offer some form of maintenance or update contract at a pre-agreed price. If you want to future-proof and protect your investment, choose a course that provides updates as part of the outlay cost, to ensure you don't have ad-hoc 'surprise' expenditures that you haven't budgeted for.

- 8. Save money:** “If implemented correctly, online learning can deliver huge cost-efficiency gains to an Organisation”. Brandon Hall, a leading online learning analyst, calculated that there is around a 50% cost reduction for delivering a course online vs. instructor led training. To put just one person in a classroom for a day can cost around £100 when you take into consideration the cost of the trainer, equipment rental, preparation of course notes, travel expenses, lunch etc. Think about how much a training day costs and whether the number of days could potentially be reduced, perhaps by providing preparatory online training before attending the classroom course. Effective preparation ensures students are all at the same level and keeps the session length to a minimum. It also reduces the risk of attention loss and an online resource allows students to re-visit topics that were covered in the classroom, which will help with knowledge retention and result in improved performance.
- 9. DIY versus purchasing:** Paying professional online learning companies to create customised courses can be very expensive versus the option of writing your own. These companies will typically use graphical designers, voiceover actors, instructional designers, and various other technical experts to deliver a high quality learning experience to the end-user. These skills are not typically available within an organisation and this will show! One option is to look for off-the-shelf courses that can be tailored to meet your local needs. This way you will benefit from a professional course customised to your needs for a fraction of the full development cost.
- 10. How to deliver the online training:** If you have a large number of people to train, consider how you are going to deliver the training. You could send it out on CD's; the advantage of this is people do not have to have access to the internet or intranet and can run the courses on any PC whenever they want. The downside is you have no control or visibility of whether the courses are being taken or who is passing or failing them. If a newer version of the CD is released, you have the added problem of re-distributing new CD's and ensuring people discontinue with the older version. A better option would be to make the courses available through your corporate Intranet; this takes away the headache of distribution and version control, but you still have no idea if anyone is taking the courses. Also, if a person cannot access the intranet, for example staff working from home or from external agencies, then this could be a problem. The best way to deliver online training is typically through something often called a Learning Management System (LMS). Every member of staff has an account which they can use to login and take a range of courses. The key advantage of an LMS over the corporate Intranet option is that you have visibility of what courses people are taking and what tests they are passing (or failing). This enables you to manage the training effectively to ensure learners get the best experience and you also have evidence to support the business benefit of using online training.