

IT training

Incorporating IT Skills

A Haymarket publication

Project manuals



A review of the books that will help you plan and implement major changes in your organisation **p46**

Open all hours

Is the arrival of 24/7 e-learning extending your working day? **p32**



Paperless homes

How Brian Reynolds of Stonham Housing Association rolled out a system to cut down on paperwork **p26**

The remote helpdesk

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Think Tank Freelance v. in-house trainers: our panel debates **p22**

Clive Shepherd

E-learning should embrace online books

If you want to insult the designer of an e-learning course, you claim that what they've produced is no more than a page-turning exercise. If you told a best-selling author that their novel was a real page turner, they'd be chuffed, but e-learning designers, no.

According to the people who should know, e-learning is supposed to be an interactive experience, exploiting all that processing power to have us answering questions, completing exercises, playing games and immersing ourselves in simulations. So why, all of a sudden, is there all this fuss about online books?

Even cyberpunks have to admit that the screen is not the ideal place for reading text: the resolution is much lower than print, making the characters less well-defined; it's easy to lose your place, particularly in a long document; the scrolling is tiresome; and computers don't look, feel or even smell as nice as books.

It is perhaps surprising, then, that major content providers should have launched their own libraries of online books and are recommending them as an important addition to their formal course offerings. SkillSoft was first, acquiring Books24x7 and integrating the service into its e-learning offering. Books24x7 has more than 5,000 titles and 2 million pages, from 164 imprints, including all the major publishers. The library includes specialist collections for IT, business and finance professionals, as well as Office Essentials for desktop software users. Elsewhere, NETg has joined forces with Safari Books Online to offer a comparable library.

The main advantage of these services is that they capitalise on what computers can do and hard copy books cannot. You can search across the whole library or within a particular book; you can email what you find to a colleague or create a collection of bookmarks to favourite pieces. The books are reformatted in HTML format in sections short enough to read online, although I'm sure many readers will print out anything they want to reflect on



However much you prefer the printed page to online books, there's no way you could find space for a library this big

in more detail.

To find the sections you want, each book has a comprehensive table of contents. But perhaps the greatest advantage is the sheer volume of books at your disposal – however much you may prefer the printed page, there's no way you could find space for a library this big.

You're probably wondering what's in it for the publishers. Well, these are not free services. You could pay as much as \$399 for an annual subscription to the Books24x7 ITPro service (although corporate licenses are undoubtedly a lot cheaper). Publishers are compensated according to the number of hits on their content and benefit further if a user likes what they see and decides to

purchase the book.

SkillSoft claims that ITPro is dramatically reducing the time it takes to solve technical problems. A user can type in an error message or code and be taken instantly to relevant explanations. Other users are turning to the service as a follow-up to an instructor-led event or an e-learning course. Furthermore, business books are being integrated into management development programmes as a matter of course.

Some trainers may claim that books are just for reference and are not a substitute for real learning. That may be true to an extent, but books have been used as a component in education and training since the printing press was invented. They can provide a richness of detail and a multiplicity of perspectives that no structured training programme can achieve. And in the hands of independent and motivated learners, there are plenty of circumstances where no formal training is required at all.

In the end, the only thing that matters is that learners themselves find the resource valuable and employers see that reflected in

productivity. By all accounts, users can't get enough and usage figures are phenomenal, so there's no reason to delay joining in the big read.

Clive Shepherd is an independent e-learning consultant and director of Above and Beyond



Online books: advantage over library



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