Use of Distance Learning Strategies for Training and Development
Mary George Opperman
Vice President for Human Resources
March 1, 2001

The popular press, management and business journals and research documentation are replete with information extolling the virtues of training and development programs. Companies report that the percentage of their payroll dollars spent annually on training and professional development is increasing. In 2001 it is essentially a given that training and developing workers is a wise business practice. Most organizations realize that when workers regularly have the opportunity to gain new skills and new insights into their own interests and abilities, their loyalty increases, as does their value to the company. Most organizations need their workers to have an increasing array of skills and the ability to handle rapid, on-going change. Most workers want and expect to be trained and will seek out employers most willing to help them gain needed skillsets. The needs of the workplace change rapidly and the need to gain new skills in the areas of technology, problem solving, project management and leadership are greater than every before.

In the early 1990s there was much written about the end of the "implied social contract", the unspoken understanding between an organization and their workers – if you are loyal and do what we tell you, you will have a job for life. After the age of downsizing, right sizing and becoming "lean and mean", organizations were no longer willing to make that promise. As the labor shortage of today became a reality, many companies wondered whether the loss of the implied social contract was a help or a hindrance. Many face labor shortages and rapid turnover as workers moved from company loyalty to a more "independent consultant" view of their working careers. Further, generations that came after the baby boomers had witnessed their parents being laid off after years of service and these new workers have a different view of the role of work in their lives and what they expect and want from their employer. As we enter the new millennium we do so with organizations that must now create vibrant workplaces that offer these workers continuous opportunities to learn, grow and add to their skillsets.   The need to provide continuous learning opportunities is not only a business need but also a retention necessity.

At the same time the workplace pace has quickened. More is expected in less time as technology speeds up response time and permits rapid assimilation and analysis of data. It has become harder and harder for workers to leave the workplace for days or even hours at a time to attend workshops and programs. From leaders to managers to line staff, the need to gain new skills has

increased while the time to do so seems to be shrinking. This dilemma provides a wonderful opportunity to use technology to assist with this form of learning.

Courses that are offered through the web, on CD and by other technology-enhanced approaches opens the door to an increase in learning opportunities for companies and organizations and their workers. Learning can be done at the worksite, without the disruption caused by travel. Moreover, learning opportunities can be tailored to fit the adult learning styles of many workers. While there is and always will be a great value in group learning opportunities, many adults are reluctant to participate because they fear embarrassment as they attempt to gain a new skill or assimilate a new concept. Learning that can take place in private is provides the adult learner a safe place to gain confidence and "practice" new skills without risk.

Distance approaches are also very effective in group settings. Joining with other corporate sites or other peer institutions through the use of video conferencing technologies allows for a broader sharing of views and ideas. Expert speakers can be "virtually" brought to an organization, which can be both cost effective and timely. Email question and answer times and open chat room style discussion opportunities can be very helpful in sharing ideas and debating concepts.

Distance-based learning tools have value in many forms of training and development. Skills can be taught and aptitude tested, concepts and processes can be discussed and debated. Leaders can understand better their own styles and the styles of others. Corporate priorities and values can be shared and new compliance regulations conveyed – all through distance learning.   From the line worker to the senior executive, the use of distance technologies to enhance training and development is an idea whose time has come. It is unwise and unlikely to contemplate replacing the more traditional training methods completely with this form of learning. Instead distance learning techniques should be considered a valuable tool as organizations face the increased need to provide continuous training to all levels of employees.