Course work

To achieve and retain a competitive commercial edge, small businesses need to invest in IT training. Robert Jacques advises on the best ways to get a technology education.

Ken Laidlaw

Prime Minister Tony Blair famously declared the three most important issues that need to be addressed in Britain today are education, education and education. If this is true for the country as a whole, then it is doubly so for a British small-business community that all too often ignores IT and IT training. There's a real danger of companies being left behind as computers are increasingly used to gain critical competitive advantage.

Among almost four million UK small and medium-sized companies, the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) estimates that an astonishing 65 percent do not even own a PC. Stephen Alambritis, head of parliamentary affairs at FSB, says: 'This is a crucial time for small businesses — a time of great danger and equally great opportunity. Technology is advancing at an incredible pace and the internet as a vehicle for trade is moving all the goalposts. Companies need to stop being frightened of IT and get up to speed

with the latest developments.' There's a training mountain to be climbed for the SME community, but the benefits on reaching the summit will usually repay the effort. However, businesses that try to set off without the right equipment, or the skills to put it to use, risk being left out in the cold. Top of the list for the journey should be a clear understanding of what business-process improvements you aim to make. Only then can an effective IT strategy be formulated to address these aims. Once this is established, you need to identify what skills training is required to make the most of your chosen technology.

Penny wise

At first glance the choices available in today's training market can appear bewildering, and you have to tread carefully to ensure you get the right package at the right price. While the city and multinational corporates have money aplenty to throw at IT and IT training, the available resources for smaller companies can seem miserly in comparison and every penny must be made to count.

For SMEs, cost is often cited as a major barrier preventing training. Although training can seem prohibitively expensive for small concerns, it's important to remember that the benefits of the initial outlay will often be repaid many times over in terms of increased productivity. The good news is that some training is actually available for free. Although provision varies widely between regions, the Government can offer IT education programmes through its Training Enterprise Council (TEC) networks, supported by associated Information Society Initiative (ISI) and Business Links local support centres. These organisations can supply highly cost effective and often free or government subsidised courses for the SME and are currently being upgraded by the Government.

'I want to see an SME sector which is forward looking, internationally orientated, IT literate and innovative,' says Margaret Beckett, President of the Board of Trade. 'Business Links will provide a small army of personal fitness trainers for the SME sector.'

Local Business Links and ISI centres aim to act as a first port of call offering impartial advice to small businesses. John Swallow, spokesperson

for the Virtual Chamber at Manchester TEC, says: 'My advice to SMEs would be to go first to Business Links. It may make a small charge, but it doesn't have a commercial axe to grind and so will be able to offer impartial advice. It can find out what's available from local training

companies, colleges of further education, TECs and ISIs.' It's also worth looking to see if you have a local charitable group that offers IT services and training. Hulme Community Computing, sponsored by Manchester City Council, is one such regional group that offers free advice and basic computer training. Mike Hubbard, company secretary at the project, explains: 'It's usually the companies that have no computer experience that are most scared. Through training we can help businesses overcome such fear and get started with IT in the first place. We advise going for mainstream programs from big-name companies like Microsoft and Lotus.'

Commercial courses

These charitable groups don't usually aim to provide in-depth technical instruction, but tend to confine themselves to a practical working

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TOP TEN TRAINING TIPS FOR SMEs

☛ **Keep costs to a minimum** by first looking carefully at government-assisted training programmes. But don't lose sight of the fact that training is an investment that can and should be repaid through increased operational efficiency.

☛ **Don't go it alone**. Try to group together with other companies to reduce training costs.

☛ **Shop around**. Get quotes for comparable training from as many local companies as possible.

☛ **Check your potential** training supplier carefully. Ask to see a list of local satisfied customers that you can contact.

☛ **Make sure** training companies have the appropriate level of industry certification.

☛ **Use in-house training** to cut down on costs, but only if it will not disrupt the smooth running of your business.

☛ **Use out-of-house training** for larger, special projects that cannot be made to fit around normal working practices.

☛ **Web-based or multimedia** training can be a cost-effective way of training suitably motivated staff.

☛ **Never pay up-front**. By holding on to your money, you maximise your bargaining position in the event that the training was not up to scratch.

☛ **Don't put** the technological training cart before the business horse. Instead work out exactly how IT can help your business, and set your system and training goals accordingly.

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Microsoft Certified
Technical Education Center

SMEs need training to keep up after the ELECTRONIC COMMERCE BILL becomes law

To retain a competitive edge, successful companies of all sizes have always recognised the need to keep up with technology. The internet, though, is changing all the business rules.

The Electronic Commerce Bill, announced in the last Queen's speech, is currently making its way through parliament and should become law this summer. It aims to allow businesses to conduct secure financial transactions over the internet. The SME market faces a huge struggle in this emerging digital marketplace. The rewards are potentially massive, but only effective IT training will enable them to be realised.

'Electronic commerce is crucial to the future prosperity of our economy and the competitive position of our industries,' says Barbara Roche, former Minister for small firms and now financial secretary at the Treasury. As the Government assembles the legal framework, forward-thinking businesses are scrambling to set up their virtual shop fronts in cyberspace. 'The electronic internet marketplace is a massive opportunity for SMEs. The beauty is, while the shop is closed and the proprietor fast asleep, the system never stops taking orders, potentially from all over the world,' claims Stephen Alambritis of the Federation of Small Businesses. 'Electronic trade can increase the customer base beyond recognition, while at the same time reducing costs.'

But this opportunity does not come without risks. In order for these highly complex technical projects to succeed, staff need to be given effective training to set up and manage the new systems.

Certified Professional qualification, but they'll cost you more than the government sponsored initiatives. You pays your money and you takes your choice. 'The advantage of going through the TECs is that you may be able to have part of the cost subsidised. The disadvantage is the paperwork and forms you have to deal with for the subsidy. On the other hand, you will certainly pay more for private training. But if you choose carefully and find the right provider in the private sector, it will usually be more flexible and up to date with the latest technology,' says Alambritis.

But Hubbard advises SMEs to check out all the low-cost options from TECs and local colleges before shelling out for private training. 'Further education colleges can offer much better value than companies charging £100 per day,' he says. 'Computers are just a business tool and it's often overkill to take hugely expensive and very detailed courses. But if you find your needs can only be met through private training, reducing costs becomes the number one priority.'
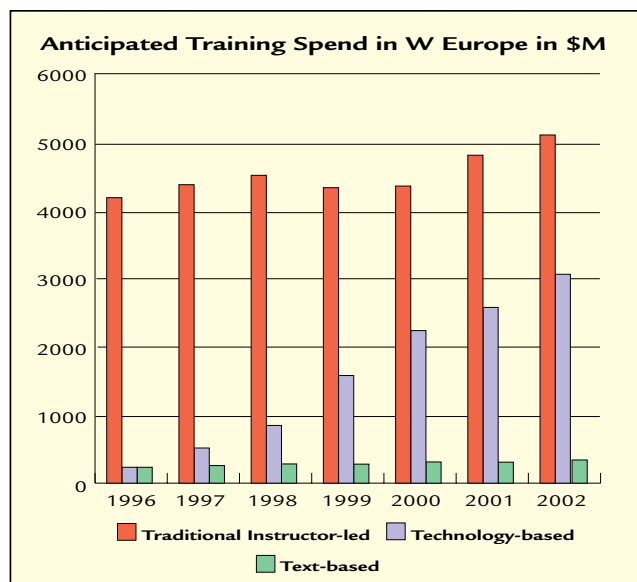
FSB advises trying to 'piggyback' on courses already being conducted for larger companies — ideally companies with which you already have a trading relationship. If this isn't feasible, the Forum suggests that a group of local businesses that share similar training needs club together to negotiate a discount through economies of scale.

Steve Gilroy, MD at Microsoft certified training provider Executrain Europe, acknowledges that some SME managers are put off by the perceived high cost of training. But he promises prices are falling even while courses are becoming more flexible. 'Trainers are increasingly targeting the SME market — it's a huge growth area,' he says. 'Costs are already coming down as a result of fierce competition, and businesses are increasingly opting for the flexible courses we offer that fit in with their working schedules. People want training during evenings and weekends so that's what we now offer.'

overview of popular systems and desktop programs. While not detailing all of the technical intricacies, they'll at least get you started. If you need to delve into greater detail — for example, learning how to install and handle a new, complex infrastructure — then you may consider one of many commercial IT training providers.

These organisations offer an extensive variety of courses that can be tailored to your particular needs and typically lead to an industry-recognised certification such as the Microsoft

Private practice

When dealing with the private sector it's important to realise that not all commercial training companies are created equal. The best advice is to shop around, get as many

Anticipated Training Spend in W Europe in $M

Year	Traditional Instructor-led	Technology-based	Text-based
1996	4200	250	250
1997	4400	500	280
1998	4550	850	300
1999	4350	1600	300
2000	4400	2250	350
2001	4850	2600	350
2002	5150	3100	400

quotes as possible and make sure your potential provider is suitably qualified, preferably with the appropriate level of certification from the manufacturer of your software or system. You must also hang on to your money until the course is over so that you remain in the strongest bargaining position if the trainer fails to deliver on its promises. This is most effectively done by contacting recent customers from competing training providers to ensure they were happy with the service.

'There's no shortage of companies offering training courses. People need to think very carefully about where they go and make sure the provider is reputable, rather than just choosing the first name in the phone book,' warns Clare Curtis, Microsoft's certification development manager. Microsoft does not conduct training itself, but offers its courses through approved third parties. 'We have our Microsoft Certified Technical Education Centres where we strictly specify how the training programmes must be conducted. We set minimum standards covering aspects including qualification of

▲EACH OF THESE WEB SITES IS A GOOD STARTING POINT FOR SME'S LOOKING FOR LOCAL IT TRAINERS AND LOW-COST TRAINING

trainers and specification of equipment and course material, so that customers are guaranteed a high-quality service for their money,' explains Curtis.

It's not just a question of choosing a training company, but of choosing a company that offers exactly the right course. Gilroy warns that some trainers are guilty of selling inappropriate courses because they don't adequately check their customers' requirements. 'Some companies sell training that's just not appropriate. If a business needs product overview training there's no value in taking a five week in-depth course,' he says.

The right stuff

Having successfully chosen the right provider and the right course, all that remains is to work out the best way to deliver the training. For some companies in-house programmes can be effective, but can disrupt the everyday running of a small business. You could send your staff away on a course, which will be more expensive but doesn't interfere with the workplace. If staff are suitably enthusiastic, self-study courses can be cheap and effective.

'One of the fastest-moving areas in IT is web-based training. We're seeing a huge growth in this relatively inexpensive and flexible approach. Most independent research shows a high data retention rate,' says Sheila McGovern, research analyst at International Data Corporation (IDC).

There are clearly many options to consider, and for SMEs the IT training market may seem like a minefield. You must tread carefully and choose the right course, the right provider and the right method of delivering the training. And, if you keep your head and make the correct choices, your business can emerge stronger and fitter, armed with the right technology for the commercial battle in the next millennium. □

PCW CONTACTS

There are no universally applicable telephone numbers for the following, so URLs have been supplied. Respective local bodies can be reached through their local numbers, all of which are on the web pages of the sites listed.

Business Link
www.businesslink.co.uk
Enterprise Zone
www.enterprisezone.orig.uk
Training and Enterprise Councils
www.tec.co.uk
Microsoft Training and Certification
www.microsoft.com/train_cert
Information Society Initiative
www.isi.gov.uk/isi/lsclist.html
Forum of Private Businesses (FPB)
01436 671990 (Scotland)
FPB headquarters, Knutsford, Cheshire
01565 634467