Skills and Employer Responsiveness (SER) programme
Webinars: a guide for training providers

Introduction

The recent rapid expansion of technology has created many invaluable resources, but because of the speed of change they are often harnessed later than necessary. This guide explains why the development of webinars could prove a key tool in improving the services offered by training providers.

What is a webinar?

Webinars (web seminars) are online seminars, meetings or conferences that link all participants in a conference environment similar to a 'face-to-face' meeting.

How does it work?

A webinar works by connecting participants via a computer to the internet. Webinar software then allows participants to communicate through sound and/or images with other participants. The hardware needed is basic and therefore readily available. The software allows participants to locate and invite particular individuals (through personal usernames or email addresses) and allows a large number of participants to be involved.

Financial costs

The cost of webinars is relatively small. The hardware required is standard equipment that almost all companies will already own, and the service charges for software use are relatively small. These costs are offset by the savings that webinars can bring.

Why use webinars?

Below are five reasons why webinars are a better choice than face-to-face conferences and seminars.

Save time

In a competitive environment, time lost can be costly. Situations often demand seminars or conferences but the gains from these meetings can be limited. Face-to-face meetings require participants to remove themselves from their normal working environments and spend a lot of time travelling. Webinars mean people can take part without having to travel, which means they are more flexible and can be arranged earlier or later in the working day. On top of this, participants have all the resources of their own workplace to hand.

Easy access
Webinars have no geographical limitations. In a globalised environment important discussions often need to take place with individuals across the globe and webinars provide the resources to do this. They also save the expense of the travel and accommodation that would be required for a face-to-face event.

Computer skills
Computer skills have become important in a variety of occupations. The use of webinars encourages those skills, as well as developing interpersonal and communication skills.

Data storing and sharing capabilities
Video recording broadcasting through webinar software means a conference can be recorded with no extra effort – very useful for a participant wishing to review the events of a conference. The recordings can also be shared or even sold to other interested individuals. Data stored on a participant's computers can be shared during discussion and webinar software often provides an interactive whiteboard. Polling software built into webinars allows everyone in the discussion to take part in any decisions and vote. This vote can then be collated, and output in many potential forms (statistics, graphs etc.) and distributed quickly to a wider audience.

Corporate responsibility
Sustainability is an important consideration for every business in every industry. Business travel contributes significantly to use of fossil fuel. Replacing face-to-face meetings with webinars means reducing the amount of travel taking place, and thus reduces a business's carbon footprint.

Specific uses for webinars

Smooth operations
Training organisations can take many forms, sizes and roles, including the collaborations between companies and organisations that are common within the training industry. Seminars, meetings, conferences and discussions are therefore intrinsic to the smooth operation of a learning provider. Webinars can provide a key tool in linking individuals, both within an organisation and between organisations.

By their nature training programmes often operate on a wide regional or even national level. Providing an equal and cohesive programme therefore involves many individuals at many different administrative levels. Webinars provide a quick and effective way of bringing these individuals together.

Cooperating with other organisations
Training providers often share responsibility for a project with other parties, including other training providers, government agencies or other educational institutions. Webinars provide an accessible and neutral ground for inter-party discussion.

Cost effectiveness
It is important to provide a cost-effective service while maintaining a high quality of service. Increasing government cutbacks are likely to lead to difficult reductions in budgets. Webinars have the potential to reduce several costs while providing the opportunity to maintain high standards of training programmes and materials.

Presentation and distribution of materials
Most of a training provider's services and training programmes are produced in some form of documentation, in both hard copy and interactive form. Webinars provide a useful tool for

distribution, accessing the correct people quickly and at relatively low cost and participants can discuss and even edit documents as soon as they receive them.

Delivering learning
Discussion has always been a powerful tool for learning. Webinars provide an effective and realistic method for delivering training programmes to learners in an interactive environment.

They allow instructors to present and discuss material as they would in a normal learning environment, with the ability to display, edit and discuss materials. This can be combined with the potential for students to interact with e-programmes and engage more actively with the material.

Saving time and money on delivery
For many, training and learning have to be run alongside busy lives. Webinars reduce the time students also have to spend travelling and allow them to participate in the comfort of a familiar environment.

Printing large amounts of course materials can be expensive. Webinars allow an instructor to display course notes, and even draw over them (using interactive whiteboard technology) without having to produce hard copy versions.

Developing extra IT skills
As well as gaining the skills developed in the teaching programme, webinars encourage students to understand many new computer skills. Computer skills are increasingly important in the modern world and new skills provide a valuable new asset for students.

Getting started
Below are the first steps to using webinars as a business tool.

Hardware
Hardware refers to the computer equipment needed to run a webinar. Much of it is standard equipment that many organisations will already own.

Computer
Webinars do not have any specialised requirements; they can be run on any standard PC, desktop, laptop or notebook computer, although older computers with lower specifications may struggle and slow down the process.

Camera
All computer cameras are suitable for use in a webinar, including webcams. Lower quality (lower resolution) cameras may not be suitable as they may not provide a clear enough picture.

Microphone
All computer microphones are suitable for the operation of a webinar.

Software
Running a webinar requires a computer program to operate all the tasks and instructions. Some of these are run through your web browser and do not require any extra software. Most of the software companies offer a free trial, making it easy to ascertain which provider is most suitable for you. All you need to take part in a webinar, however, is an internet connection and a phone line. Below are some leading brands of webinar providers.

- **Webex** offers a composite, reliable, easy-to-use, fully recordable webinar program run by Cisco. It provides complete document-sharing capabilities, interactive whiteboard, and the ability to allocate control of the meeting to any of the participants. It also allows all participants to take part and share documents, diagrams and annotations. The 'Cisco WebEx Training Centre Online Classroom' offers accessible training exercises with features such as simulations, demos, polling and tests. The minimum service package is limited to 25 participants but can be extended to up to 1,000 per webinar.

  To find out more about Webex visit: www.webex.co.uk/index.html or to find out specifically about the 'Cisco WebEx Training Centre Online Classroom' visit: ww.webex.co.uk/product-overview/training-center.html

- **Go to Webinar** also offers a comprehensive system with similar tools and training package, as well as a dashboard that displays detailed information on the particular involvement of each participant.

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- To find out more about Go to Webinar visit: www3.gotomeeting.com/en_US/w/g2w_sem3LMlp.tmpl or to find out specifically about the training package visit: www.webex.co.uk/product-overview/training-center.html

- Other software options:
  Netviewer: www.netviewer.com/en/products/netviewer-webinar/
  Adobe Connect: www.adobe.com/products/acrobatconnectpro/
  Microsoft Office Live Meeting: www.microsoft.com/online/office-live-meeting/buy.mspx

There are also many other smaller webinar providers.

The Skills and Employer Responsiveness (SER) Programme is funded by LSIS. It is a sector-led programme tasked with increasing the capacity of all providers in the learning and skills sector to work with employers and help address the current and future skills needs of their business and workforce.

The SER programme is managed in the **East of England, East Midlands and West Midlands** by ALP, the 157 Group, NIACE and AoC. It offers support in three key strands:
- Employer responsiveness
- Apprenticeship provision
- Pre-employment provision and transition into work.

The Programme offers a variety of support including workshops, webinars, coaching and tailored support. This briefing is current as at March 2011.

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